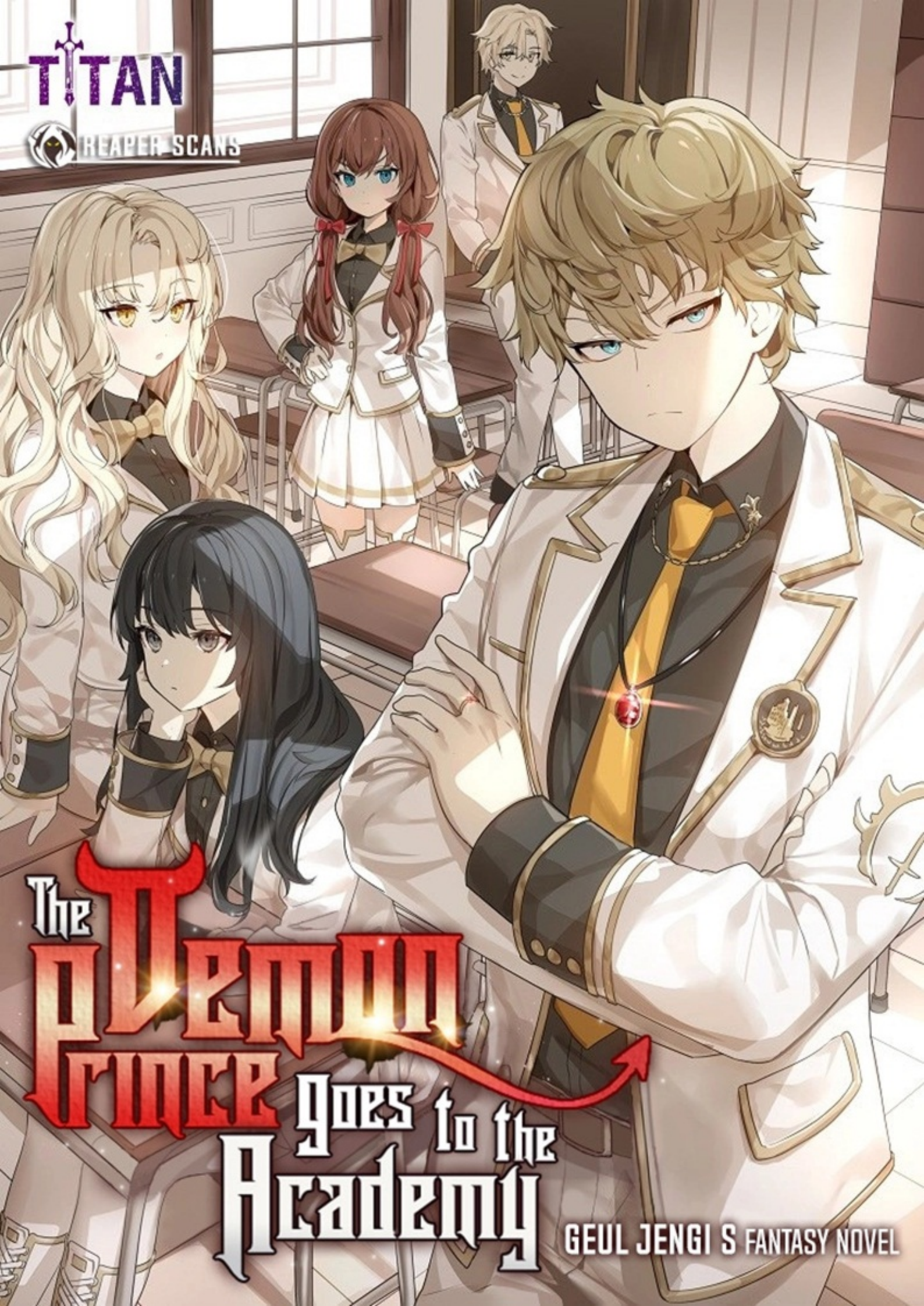
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REAPER SCANS
The Demon Prince goes to the Academy
GEUL JENGI S FANTASY NOVEL

THE DEMON PRINCE GOES TO THE ACADEMY

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- VOLUME 8 -

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CHAPTER 351

The Demon King's palace was so vast and immense that it took quite some time to explore each floor. As everything of value had already been taken, most of the rooms were either completely empty or filled with dust.

There were spaces like a library without any books, or what seemed to be a storage room, wide open and entirely empty.

There was even a throne where the Demon King likely once sat. The throne room was larger than any other throne room they had seen before.

It made sense, as the demons that entered here varied greatly in size.

After exploring the first floor, they continued to the upper levels. They passed the place where the magic scroll had been discovered.

As expected, it was completely empty.

And as they walked down the corridor, they couldn't help but arrive at that particular place.

The prison cell.

"…"

"This is…"

Charlotte nodded her head.

"Yes, this is where I was imprisoned."

A place filled with nothing but terrible memories.

"I don't think there's any good reason to go in there…"

Charlotte hesitated, then turned away with effort.

There would be no remnants of the Demon King here, only trauma.

Whoop

"Your Highness!"

"Ah…”

As Charlotte walked, she suddenly stumbled and was supported by Turner.

"Are you okay?"

As she approached, Charlotte's forehead was covered in cold sweat.

Could the shocking memories be affecting her body?

"It's nothing… My legs just suddenly gave way…”

The memories were not easily forgotten, and returning to the scene made it even more difficult. Turner handed Charlotte over to me.

"I'll leave her to you for a moment. I'll find a place to rest."

"Alright."

Charlotte leaned on me, gripping my arm, and Turner rushed down the corridor.

"Haa… Haa…”

Charlotte breathed heavily, as if she had been running hard.

"Is it dangerous now?"

"No… It's not that… Just…”

It wasn't a sudden loss of strength but more like symptoms of hyperventilation. After taking a few deep breaths, Charlotte's breathing soon steadied.

"I knew it wouldn't be easy, but… it's still hard."

She had only told me that she was the one who killed all the prisoners. I let Charlotte lean against the wall and offered her my arm for support.

How much time had passed?

"I've found a suitable place to rest. Let's go there."

Turner, now out of breath, had checked the upper floors and approached us with the news.

After passing through several more corridors and climbing a few more floors, they arrived at a room that looked like a bedroom.

There were no valuables, but the furniture remained intact. After opening the window and dusting off the sofa, Turner helped Charlotte lie down on it.

Charlotte offered a weak smile.

"Lady Turner, I'm not ill."

"Even so, you should rest. We've walked quite a bit today."

“…Haha, you're right."

Charlotte lay on the sofa, catching her breath.

It was a strange feeling, not knowing whether to worry about a traumatic episode or to be grateful that it wasn't an outburst of strength. Saviolin Turner quietly surveyed the bedroom.

"I know we found this place in a hurry, but it seems to be the bedroom of someone quite high-ranking, even among the Demon King's castle."

“…Ah, you're right."

Though there were no valuables, all the large furniture remained. Considering everything was of high quality, Turner's guess that it might have belonged to someone high-ranking within the Demon King's castle seemed plausible.

Somehow, this feeling grew stranger.

"Tch… It's impossible to identify who this bedroom belonged to since everything of value has been indiscriminately plundered. Although it might not be that important…"

Turner seemed to entertain the possibility that this might have been the Demon King's bedroom. It was, indeed, a room that could warrant such speculation.

It could have belonged to one of the Four Heavenly Kings, the Demon King, or perhaps another noble figure.

-Creak

Turner searched the room for any remaining items, opening wardrobes and rummaging through drawers.

Charlotte, exhausted, suddenly struggled to sit up on the sofa.

Saviolin Turner rummaged through the drawers.

All the valuable items would have been taken, so there should have been nothing left.

However, for some reason, an odd anxiety burned through my body.

-Creak

Each time Saviolin Turner opened a drawer, an intense sense of foreboding told me something would be discovered.

It felt as though the warning of intuition was pricking at my heart with a needle.

-Creak

"…?"

Saviolin Turner opened a drawer in the ornamental cabinet and tilted her head.

"Indeed, the things that wouldn't fetch any money are still here."

She pulled something out of the drawer.

At first glance, it was a high-quality wooden case. The lid was open, but the contents remained untouched.

It seemed like someone had intended to take it, but after seeing the contents, decided to leave it behind.

"Biscuits… it seems."

Charlotte stared at the biscuits, eyes wide.

I clenched my teeth so hard that my molars nearly cracked, trying not to show any expression.

"Can you give that to me?"

Charlotte asked calmly, almost frighteningly so.

"Your Highness, they must be stale by now."

"I don't want to eat them."

“…Very well. Here they are."

Charlotte gazed at the biscuits that Turner handed her, the ones wrapped in their packaging.

Individually wrapped biscuits.

Charlotte stared intently at them.

Biscuits.

Those from that time.

'You must be hungry. Eat these.'

'You, you… who are you?'

'I'm fine. You eat first.'

'You, you too… you eat too.'

Biscuits.

Found in the bedroom of someone who likely belonged to the high-ranking demon nobility, wrapped in the same packaging as those from that time.

Charlotte unwrapped the biscuit and suddenly snapped it in half.

"Your Highness!"

-Crunch!

Despite Turner's protest, Charlotte bit into the biscuit.

Had she sensed something?

Charlotte would never forget it.

Even if she forgot everything else, she would never forget the shape and taste of that biscuit she had eaten at that time.

She couldn't tell if it had the same taste as before.

However.

As Charlotte took a bite of the biscuit, tears rolled down her eyes.

“Ah.”

Charlotte knew something.

“Ahaha.”

“…Your Highness? Why, why are you acting like this?”

There had been suspicious circumstances, but she had tried not to believe them and tried to deny them.

There's a limit to denying an unwanted truth.

This biscuit wasn't definitive proof either.

But too much had piled up.

Evidence and suspicion had accumulated.

Piling up, and piling up again.

The biscuits, individually wrapped in an extravagant case.

Would she think that something like this couldn't be found just anywhere?

Charlotte's thoughts eventually led her to a conclusion.

“Huh, huh… Huhuh. Ah. Huh.”

“Your Highness! Why are you doing this?”

Now, it became an irreversible certainty.

“Heh, hehe! Heh, hehe!”

Charlotte, with her waist bent, laughed like a madwoman.

It seemed as if her vague hope that it might not be true had completely vanished.

What was Charlotte thinking?

In the end, did she think she was just being used in the next Demon King's escape?

I couldn't know.

“Hehehe! Heheheheheheh! Heheh! Eugh! Ugh! Heheh!”

Charlotte's laughter, in the end, turned into sobbing.

“…There's a slightly larger bedroom inside, which we think might be the Demon King's.”

Having looked around all the nearby rooms, Saviolin Turner spoke with an expression that suggested she didn't know how to explain it.

Charlotte had asked her to check if there was a slightly larger bedroom nearby.

There was only one room deeper than this bedroom.

In terms of scale, it seemed to be the Demon King's bedroom. We don't know the architectural philosophy of the Demon King's palace, but what would the second most luxurious bedroom right next to the Demon King's sleeping chamber mean?

Charlotte sat blankly with the biscuit box in front of her.

This wasn't definitive proof either, but it seemed to be the final psychological evidence for Charlotte.

Charlotte had known for a long time that Valier could not be unrelated to the Demon King.

However, the Demon King's successor had only recently become active.

Charlotte gave no explanation, but Turner seemed to know what Charlotte was thinking.

I remained silent.

No words could comfort Charlotte now, and even if they could, it didn't seem like my place to do so.

“Your Highness, I don't know why… you're acting like this, but in the end, it's just a biscuit. This… whatever you may think, Your Highness, it's not enough evidence to be certain of anything…”

Saviolin Turner tried to say something but stopped.

She didn't know what this biscuit meant to Charlotte.

Upon hearing Turner's words, Charlotte slowly nodded her head.

"Perhaps you're right."

Charlotte speaks calmly.

"I've… given up now."

Charlotte has stopped defending Valier even in her heart.

"The child who saved me is indeed the son or successor of the Demon King. I wanted to believe otherwise, but I won't anymore."

While not a definitive piece of evidence, enough clues have piled up for Charlotte to build a wall around her heart.

The child who saved her is the Demon King's successor and responsible for the demon attacks in the Empire.

Charlotte is certain of it.

"I've only had doubts. If so, why did he save me… why… even though he could have escaped alone, why did he insist on saving me… so he might not be, there's no reason for him to save me. So, he might not be… I wanted to believe."

At the point when they left the Demon King's castle with the teleport scroll, they could have escaped on their own. But they risked danger to return with Dyrus and save Charlotte.

That might be why Charlotte tried to believe in him until the very end.

There is no reason for the Demon King's successor to risk his life to save Charlotte. Rather, he could have left her to die.

There's no reason for me, who should hate the Empire as much as Artorius, to save Charlotte.

That was the last psychological barrier that made Charlotte think Valier might not be the son of the Demon King.

But now, that barrier has crumbled.

"Now… I think I know why he saved me."

So, Charlotte ponders now.

The reason why the Demon King's son had to save her.

A justifiable reason worth risking his life.

Charlotte looks at me this time.

"It's because the power of the Demon King or his soul is dwelling within me… that's why…"

Charlotte mumbles absentmindedly.

Looking at her mumbling, I felt chills down my spine.

It seemed as if Charlotte was about to reach a conclusion.

"It wasn't that he saved me… It wasn't that he saved me…"

Charlotte speaks slowly, staring at Biscuit with a voice filled with betrayal.

"He saved… the Demon King's soul… dwelling within me…"

Once Charlotte was certain that Valier was the son of the Demon King, the only rational conclusion she could reach was that.

She could never think that he saved her out of kindness or wanting to save her. There is no reason for the Demon King's son to save the Empire's princess.

They lost the war.

The Demon King was dead.

It is impossible that the Demon King's son doesn't know that the princess of the Empire is captive here and that the soul of the Demon King dwells within her.

So, it was not to save the princess, but the Demon King's soul within her.

He risked his life to save her in order to resurrect the Demon King at the heart of the Empire someday.

"Heh, hehe. When I think about it… it was obvious… it was obvious…"

Charlotte couldn't understand why she hadn't reached this conclusion earlier, and she let out a hollow laugh.

'Charlotte,

It's not like that, you misunderstand.

I just didn't want you to die, and at that time, I didn't know who you were, nor did I know that such a thing was dormant within you.'

I wanted to say it.

It felt like someone was wringing my heart.

The uncontrollable misunderstanding grew, and it was too rational a misunderstanding to deny.

'No, it's not like that.

I've been watching over you all this time and have been trying to continue to protect you, even now I'm still trying,' I wanted to say that.

But if I reveal my identity, I will die.

If I expose myself as Valier, all Charlotte will feel is betrayal.

The countless lies I've told Charlotte up to now are a problem, and the way Charlotte's thoughts are unfolding is also a problem.

Charlotte might even think that my control of her symptoms is ultimately for the complete resurrection of the Demon King.

Certainly, if I hadn't stopped Charlotte on the day she went berserk, there would

have been casualties, but Charlotte would have eventually died.

No one saw how desperately I fought that day, which ultimately helped me hide my identity, but it also left me with the problem that Charlotte herself didn't know how sincerely I fought for her.

Once she begins to suspect Valier, revealing that I am Valier would make all my actions as Reinhardt about reviving the Demon King.

"Ha, haha… haha…”

In the end, I couldn't say anything in front of Charlotte, who was laughing without strength.

CHAPTER 352

The investigation of the surface of the Demon King's Castle only led to the outcome of forcing Charlotte to acknowledge a fact she didn't want to admit.

Charlotte came to the conviction that Valier had been using her from the beginning. The once flimsy logic seemed to fit perfectly now, as long as she followed the reasoning that it was not for her own salvation, but for the resurrection of the Demon King.

Thus, Charlotte was in no condition to do anything more today.

It seemed as though all her motivation had vanished due to the feeling of betrayal.

Would she regret warning Eleris to run away?

At that time, Charlotte was already almost certain that I was the successor to the Demon King.

It was just that her certainty about Valier's intentions for saving her had only arisen now.

Now it was clear.

The moment my true identity is revealed, Charlotte will have no choice but to hate me, even if others don't.

The important thing is, if I find a way to completely heal Charlotte in the Demon King's Castle and execute it, she will be able to realize that my intentions to protect her were pure, even if my identity is revealed later.

Somehow.

Now, I am thinking under the assumption that a situation where my identity is revealed will inevitably come.

There is no other way.

If I were to live a quiet life in the temple, I wouldn't encounter a situation where my identity would be exposed.

But because that's impossible, I'm involved in various incidents.

Despite knowing that a long tail gets stepped on, I have no choice but to keep extending it.

I'm not in a position to explore any further, and there was nothing more to see on the surface, as it had already been revealed.

I discovered Valier's room, which I had never known before, and Charlotte gained some certainty because of that.

So naturally, there were questions.

The first place I regained consciousness was not in Valier's room, but in the hallway.

I am the Prince of the Demon Realm, Valier.

But I am also not Valier.

The real Prince of the Demon Realm, Valier, was not a good prince. He was a scoundrel, lazy, and a good-for-nothing without any abilities.

He was a pathetic fellow who relied on the Demon King's power and did nothing but cause trouble.

Although I used the convenient excuse of having lost my memory, I knew nothing about Valier other than the fact that he was a scoundrel and a shameless brat.

But there must have been a life for Valier before I became him.

So.

Even when the Demon King was on the verge of death, Valier must have been doing something. At that moment, I possessed Valier's body.

I saw Valier's room for the first time today.

The first place I regained consciousness was the hallway.

Not a room, but a hallway.

It means that I was going somewhere.

Where on earth was Valier going before I possessed him?

To the battleground where the Demon King was fighting?

In the weakened state that was nothing short of the epitome of incompetence at the time?

A question I had never had before came to mind upon arriving at the Demon King's Castle.

The guest room of the garrison command.

It seemed to be a room prepared in advance for visiting high-ranking nobles or military personnel who had come for inspection.

The interior of the place was much like a hotel, with multiple bedrooms, making it a comfortable spot to stay for several days.

Instead of each taking a separate room, we decided to share one, as we were unsure of how Charlotte's condition would be during the night. Anyway, the bedrooms were separate, so it didn't really matter.

"I'll go check on the situation of the underground search."

"Yes, Turner."

"Rest for a while."

Saviolin Turner briefly left the room. Charlotte, still wearing the robe she had been in all day, hung it on a hanger and stared intently at me.

“…Why?"

“…I want to take a bath."

That's right.

She had always been extremely shy about anyone hearing her bathe, hadn't she? I could see Charlotte wanting to say something to me but hesitating out of embarrassment.

“…I'll step out for a bit."

Under normal circumstances, I wouldn't know, but Charlotte's current state wasn't something I should meddle with.

“…I'm sorry."

While Charlotte bathed, I remained outside the guest room.

The hallway in front of the command post guest room.

Through the window, I could see the towering walls of the Demon King's fortress.

A secret place.

The underground area seemed most likely, but how were we going to enter, and how would we bypass the traps?

There would be rangers and wizards familiar with traps at the garrison, trying to uncover the secrets of the Demon King's fortress, but their struggle meant that we wouldn't have a clever solution either.

-Thunk

While I was lost in thought, time had passed considerably. The door opened, and Charlotte peeked her head out.

Water dripped from her hair, and her face was flushed red.

"I'm done bathing…”

Somehow, that statement led to strange thoughts…

Charlotte, now dressed in a white dress, wore slippers and stood in front of the mirror, rubbing her hair and wiping away the dampness.

Such a task would typically be done by someone else, but since life at the temple required self-sufficiency, it wasn't particularly awkward for Charlotte or Bertus.

The dignity or authority of a princess.

I didn't feel much of either. She seemed like an ordinary person of her age.

"Why do you keep looking at me like that?"

Charlotte asked, becoming conscious of my gaze.

"Oh, nothing. Just…”

"Hmm."

Charlotte returned her attention to the mirror, drying her hair.

After a while, Charlotte, having roughly dried her hair, came and sat beside me.

A princess wearing only a white dress and slippers.

Charlotte sat next to me and leaned her head against me quietly.

Charlotte must have been mentally and physically exhausted today, so I didn't say much.

"It's strange."

“…What is?"

"The story I heard from Detto. It keeps coming to mind lately."

The bizarre tale of how we would end up getting married.

"When I first heard it, I thought it was nonsense. Our social statuses were so

different, and though I thought you were a good person, to be honest… I didn't have that kind of interest in you."

“…So what?"

"You're the Champion of Tu'an."

“…That's right."

"Status? That's not a problem anymore."

The Champion of Tu'an.

Being chosen by the gods, my status becomes something more special than anyone else in the world.

It's something incomparable to royalty or imperial bloodlines.

"I think emotions aren't a problem anymore," Charlotte said calmly. Her confession was so plain that it didn't create much of an impact.

"I used to think the prophecy was definitely wrong."

Is it now strange for her to think the prophecy won't come true? I couldn't find anything to say, so I remained silent.

"I still think it's wrong, but the reason has changed drastically."

"What do you mean?"

Charlotte leaned on me and looked up at my face.

"I never intended to do something like marry you."

"I guess so, right?"

Charlotte smiled at me.

"But now, even if I said I want to marry you, it seems like you wouldn't go through with it."

Her words took my breath away.

Her statement was so direct that I couldn't find a suitable response.

"With your personality, I think you'd run away even if the emperor ordered our marriage."

"What… exactly… are you trying to say?"

What on earth should I do? As I struggled for a response, Charlotte suddenly hugged my neck.

Having just washed her hair, its fragrance filled my nostrils.

"You don't have to love me, Reinhardt."

"…"

"But please promise me one thing."

I felt moisture on my neck.

Charlotte was crying.

"Don't… betray me."

She wouldn't ask for love, but she pleaded not to be betrayed.

I could make that promise.

It was an easy promise to make.

It was a plea for compromise. Betrayal had weakened Charlotte emotionally.

So she asked me.

Not to betray her.

It was an easy promise.

"Of course."

But the moment I said that.

I had already been dishonest, and therefore, I was no different than betraying Charlotte.

As she grew more distant from Valier, Charlotte seemed to get closer to me. And when she finally realized she had been used and abandoned all hope for Valier…

Charlotte had no choice but to cling to me even more.

My relationship with Charlotte only intensified my guilt.

As much as Charlotte clung to me, I, too, became obsessed with her.

An obsession mixed with a sense of duty to ensure her happiness.

That's why, although lying to Charlotte every moment was difficult, I couldn't leave her alone.

And then.

This room wasn't meant for just one person.

So, there was a problem.

-Thunk

"!"

"!"

"Oh."

While Charlotte was clinging to me, Saviolin Turner returned to the room.

"…"

Charlotte clung to me, unable to turn back, frozen in place.

As soon as she opened the door, she became a statue without uttering a word.

The same thing happened to me when our eyes met.

It was a situation ripe for misunderstanding.

No, it wasn't just a misunderstanding.

Turner seemed to loathe herself for opening the door without knocking, and Charlotte seemed to loathe herself for impulsively acting without thinking.

For the first time in a while, I could read Turner's thoughts from her expression.

'What did I just see?'

'Should I leave?'

'No, I've already seen it. What's the point of leaving?'

'Should I stop it?'

'No, why would I stop it?'

'What do I say?'

'What should I do?'

In the end, Turner stepped back with a stiff movement as if nothing had happened and closed the door.

-Thunk

"…"

Charlotte let go of me.

After confessing something to me, Charlotte's face turned beet red as she seemed surprised that she hadn't considered someone might witness the scene.

"I, I'll… go, go to… sleep."

“…Alright."

As if her soul had been drained, Charlotte staggered into the bedroom and quietly closed the door behind her.

A while later.

-Knock knock knock

A polite knock sounded softly.

“…There's only one guest room, it seems."

With an expression of not knowing what to do, Saviolin Turner sighed and spoke.

No.

Was she trying to sleep in another room to avoid the situation?

Weren't you supposed to prevent something like this from happening?

"I, in this, this kind of situation… what on earth should I…”

It seemed clear that she had taken more mental damage than Charlotte.

With trembling lips, she cautiously opened her mouth.

"That… make sure to… use contraception…”

No.

What.

What is this?

-Startled!

"No! No! That's not it!"

Caught off guard by the unexpected words, I forgot what I was going to say, and

Charlotte, her face flushed red, burst open the door and screamed at the top of her lungs.

Whether Charlotte was actually sleeping in her room or pretending to sleep, she showed no signs of stepping out today, and Saviolin Turner sat listlessly on the sofa.

"What on earth… did I say…"

Although it seemed like something an adult would say, it was definitely an impulsive outburst.

Words tend to jump out without warning, and that's what happened with Turner just now.

Depending on the situation, it could be considered a grave offense. Luckily, Charlotte didn't make an issue of it, and no one else heard.

If things continued like this, it was clear that Turner would be mentally out of it for the rest of the day.

"It's a misunderstanding. Whatever you're thinking."

"…Is it?"

In a room with just the two of us.

A man and a woman embracing.

Can a misunderstanding really be made in that situation?

She looked at me with that expression.

No, I mean, all sorts of thoughts could come to mind, but it's not that far!

"Let's talk about work."

"Work? Oh… oh, right. Work."

Saviolin Turner seemed to have completely forgotten why she had come here in the first place. She coughed a few times.

"I heard about the underground search from the commander… It was strange."

As soon as she mentioned the matter, the atmosphere immediately changed.

She unfolded the map she had brought with her.

"We've explored up to the fifth underground floor. We found storage rooms, dungeons, armories, and even large breeding grounds for raising and imprisoning magical beasts. The underground facilities are so extensive that they're actually larger than the aboveground portion of the Demon King's palace."

The scale of the underground section of the Demon King's palace was quite impressive, even just looking at the map.

"Most of the underground areas have already been explored, and all the treasures have been retrieved."

"Is there more below? You said the search isn't complete yet?"

"Yes, a few months ago, while searching the fifth floor, we found a secret staircase leading even deeper."

"Is there a sixth floor?"

"Yes."

On the spot where Saviolin Turner pointed, there was not a spiral staircase leading underground but a new door drawn, and below that, another spiral staircase was visible.

However, nothing was drawn below that spiral staircase.

"The stairs continue downward. You could keep going for hours."

“…Really?"

"But after just a few steps back up, you arrive back at the fifth floor."

Saviolin Turner spoke with a stern expression.

"In other words, it's a labyrinth from the sixth floor onwards."

A labyrinth.

"We don't know if there are seventh or eighth floors, or even deeper ones. Even if we explore the sixth floor and draw a map, it's useless. The structure seems to change every time we explore. The traps are reconstructed even after they're disarmed."

The commander had given an overly simplified explanation.

The problem wasn't the traps; it was the enigmatic labyrinth below the sixth floor.

"I thought I'd be reprimanded by Her Highness for withholding information, so I deliberately downplayed it. The royal family hasn't even been informed about this underground labyrinth. In fact, we haven't even attempted to explore the sixth floor and below."

“…I see."

"It's an understandable situation. The mages can't figure out the magic behind the labyrinth, and there have been too many casualties. The number of injured and missing is countless."

The recent discovery of a labyrinth in the underground of the Demon King's castle had forced them to give up on exploration.

The commander had deliberately avoided mentioning the labyrinth, and simply stated that the underground was dangerous. He had not given a proper explanation to the princess, fearing reprimand or dismissal for withholding information. After all, they believed this to be just an inspection, so it couldn't be helped. They must have assumed she would take a quick look around and then leave.

However, they were not here for an inspection but for exploration. Therefore, Saviolin Turner needed to know exactly what was in the underground, and she had forced the commander to tell her the truth.

In the ever-changing labyrinth beneath the Demon King's palace, whose true nature remained unknown.

The labyrinth's structure constantly shifted, and traps continuously regenerated, rendering any attempts to dismantle and progress through it utterly meaningless.

Therefore, the commander was merely biding time, waiting for a withdrawal order instead of pointlessly increasing the number of casualties by sending more people into the maze. Although it was dereliction of duty, the stationed soldiers couldn't help but be grateful for such negligence.

In the original work, of course, the labyrinth would never have been excavated. The commander had tried to cover up its very existence. If the royal court knew of this, they would have undoubtedly deployed more soldiers, which would inevitably result in numerous injuries and deaths.

Though the value of human life was undeniable, it seemed that the commander's neck was on the line now that Saviolin Turner had discovered this secret.

It was certain that something existed within the labyrinth, and it was also clear that the mysterious space was connected to it.

However, therein lay the problem.

"It's far too dangerous for Her Highness to go there personally…”

The possibility of her presence in that place being obstructed was all too high.

After all, it was a perilous location for such important individuals to venture into.

CHAPTER 353

To Enter the Labyrinth or Not

Surprisingly, the answer came easily.

The next day.

"Let's go."

Charlotte made the decision lightly, having heard about the labyrinth.

"Your Highness, it's too dangerous."

Naturally, Turner shook her head and tried to dissuade Charlotte.

"If I had intended to send someone else in my place, I wouldn't have come this far. I'm fully prepared to take the risk."

Charlotte's words were true.

If she had come all this way just to delegate the task to others, she could have simply given orders from the palace in spring.

She had come to do everything herself.

"Still, we didn't know there was an unexplored labyrinth. Couldn't we take the time to uncover its identity and enter it safely?"

"Lady Turner, I'm not sure how much time I have left."

At Charlotte's heavy words, Turner bit her lip.

"It could take years to reveal the magic of the labyrinth. And I can't guarantee that I'll be safe during that time."

Charlotte glanced at me for a moment.

"I don't know how long Reinhardt's spell can stabilize my condition. I can't just wait until this power completely consumes me."

"Your Highness… That doesn't mean you have to go yourself. And there's no evidence anywhere that the labyrinth contains a solution for your condition. There must be something, but no one knows if it's what you need."

Saviolin Turner pleaded with her, almost begging. Charlotte looked at her calmly.

"Lady Turner."

"Yes, Your Highness."

"If I can't fully recover in this state, it would be better to die."

"Excuse me?"

As if hearing something unbelievable, Saviolin Turner mumbled blankly.

Better to die.

I clenched my fists without realizing it, knowing what Charlotte was thinking.

"That child, no, the current Demon King tried to save me with all his might not only to protect the soul of the previous Demon King, but also because if I die, the soul of the Demon King that dwells within me will disappear. So, if I die, the soul of the Demon King within me will vanish too."

So, dying in the labyrinth due to a trap wouldn't be a bad thing.

Charlotte spoke calmly.

"Your Highness, what on earth… What are you saying!"

"For the empire, my death wouldn't be such a bad thing…"

"Hey."

Unable to hold back, I called out to Charlotte. She looked at me with a seemingly newfound realization of what she had said and who she was speaking to.

"When you say that…”

With resentment in my voice,

I said,

"What does that make me?"

You say you don't care if you die, that it might even be better to die. I risked my life to save you.

“…I'm sorry. I'm sorry, Reinhardt."

At my words, Charlotte lowered her eyes and shuddered.

Having gained certainty about the truth of Valier, Charlotte came to another conviction: that the soul of the Demon King resided within her. She believed that there was no other reason for her to be saved.

Thus, Charlotte naturally arrived at the conclusion that it might be too late, and the Demon King could fully resurrect through her body.

Before that happened, she thought that it might be better to die.

However, that was too cruel to say in front of me and Saviolin Turner, who had risked our lives to save her.

Perhaps realizing her words were harsh, Charlotte apologized to Turner and me several times.

"Still… I think it's right for me to go myself."

But her thoughts remained unchanged.

If the Demon King intended to resurrect through Charlotte's body, she believed it was right to die for the sake of the empire.

To face the danger herself.

Charlotte's thoughts stemmed from her priority to ensure the safety of the royal

family and the empire. It was not something that could be blamed.

There was no way to change Charlotte's mind, nor any reason to do so.

Although Charlotte's words were painful to hear, she had to enter the labyrinth.

Turner watched Charlotte quietly before letting out a deep sigh.

"Not everyone who enters the labyrinth gets lost and dies or gets injured. Many people get lost for a bit and then find their way back."

It was true that there were injured and dead people, as well as those who had not returned. However, they didn't seem to be the majority.

"If it becomes dangerous, we can always come back out."

In the end, Turner couldn't break Charlotte's stubbornness.

It might become dangerous someday, but nothing would happen within the next few days. So, it was possible to slowly explore the labyrinth while preparing for the potential dangers.

Naturally, when Charlotte mentioned heading towards the underground labyrinth, the garrison commander, Count Alfred, vehemently tried to dissuade us.

"Your Highness, it's too dangerous! You don't know what could happen if you go there…"

"That's enough."

But Charlotte cut off the commander's words with an icy tone.

"You seem worried about what might happen to me if something happens there. Of course, if I go in there on my own, you'll be punished."

If Charlotte were to be endangered or killed in the hazardous labyrinth, Count Alfred, as the one responsible for the garrison, would lose his head.

That's why he had no choice but to prevent the princess from going to the labyrinth.

"But if you try to stop me, I'll make sure you pay the price for omitting the report on the Demon King's underground labyrinth."

"!"

Hiding crucial information about the Demon King's Castle would be more than enough reason for him to lose his head.

If he prevented the princess from entering the labyrinth, he would die.

If the princess entered the labyrinth and died, he would still die.

Charlotte spoke briefly while looking at the commander.

"So, don't waste your time on pointless things and pray for my safe return."

The commander had nothing else he could do.

He could only stare at us with a vacant expression as we headed toward the underground labyrinth.

The morning after we arrived at the Demon King's Castle.

We finished our meal at the barracks and once again set off toward the castle.

Although we could have asked for the assistance of a mage, Charlotte was against it.

To begin with, nobody at the barracks knew of the princess's presence except for the commander. Furthermore, we were trying to resolve a very important secret regarding Charlotte in the labyrinth.

Since it wouldn't be a good idea for more people to know about it, the three of us decided to move on our own.

To reach the entrance of the underground labyrinth, one had to descend five floors down a spiral staircase.

"An overwhelmingly large scale."

Saviolin Turner was dazed enough to mutter to herself.

The corridors and passageways, as befitting the castle of the Demon King, were much larger than ordinary ones. The spiral staircase was no different from a large structure, and the underground space was vast and spacious.

This was not the concept of an ordinary building's basement. The scale of each floor was so massive that it took a considerable amount of time to descend one floor using the spiral staircase.

Since the search of the labyrinth had already come to a halt, there were soldiers in the underground area, but they seemed to be more occupied with passing time than actually searching.

Although it wasn't quite like an underground city, it was presumed that the soldiers of the Demon King's Castle actually lived here rather than in the external barracks.

The scale was that immense.

After descending for a while and finally reaching the fifth floor, the spiral staircase came to an end.

"Going back up will be a task in itself."

Charlotte sighed, as if she was tired just from coming down. Of course, Turner and I didn't feel any different.

The fifth floor was lit with torches in various places and had iron bars.

"Is this… a prison?"

Charlotte tilted her head as she looked at the iron bars and the spaces within. Saviolin Turner, while looking at the map, shook her head.

"It seems that it used to be a breeding ground for magical beasts, not a prison."

A space where magical beasts were bred. At that, Charlotte nodded silently.

"That's why the sizes vary so much."

"Indeed."

"What happened to the magical beasts that were here…?"

"During the siege, most of them were mobilized, and the remaining ones were all disposed of."

"I see."

The procession of prisoners that we saw when we left the Demon King's Castle came to mind.

The countless demon prisoners, including the ogre who broke the chains and charged forward to help my escape.

It wasn't a pleasant memory. They had lost their will to fight with the death of the Demon King, and in their final moments, they placed all their remaining hope on me, the last Demon King.

Now, I'm scheming something completely unrelated to the wishes of those demons.

I think it's right.

I have betrayed Charlotte, and I will betray not only Sarkegaar but also Darkland as a whole.

After passing through the magical beast breeding grounds on the fifth floor, Saviolin Turner led us to a small iron-barred room at the end of the breeding grounds, using the map as a guide.

The room felt more like a prison cell than a beast training ground.

"Is this the place…?"

"Yes, it's the entrance to the labyrinth."

The secret door, discovered relatively recently.

Through the open stone wall, another circular staircase leading downward could be seen.

Contrary to the grandeur of the Demon King's Palace, the descending stairway was just over three meters high and wide enough for about four people to pass through.

The circular staircase we had descended thus far had railings and was open on all sides, allowing us to gaze upon the underground space. However, the circular staircase before us was now enclosed by stone walls.

We couldn't know where it led or when it would end.

Magic lamps on the walls of the circular staircase cast a pale light on the steps.

"Your Highness, should I go down first…?"

"We might get lost."

Saviolin Turner seemed eager to go ahead and check for danger, but Charlotte would not allow it.

"Even if we get lost, it's less frightening to get lost together."

Although death might be preferable to fear, Charlotte was shaking with anxiety.

The three of us took our first step onto the circular staircase leading to the labyrinth.

If this place was just a labyrinth and not the destination I sought, we would have thrown ourselves into danger for nothing.

How many steps had we taken?

Saviolin Turner sighed.

"The entrance is already…"

While the circular staircase continued downward, a passage had already appeared on the right side.

We had been on the fifth underground floor, so this must be the sixth.

The passage was not very wide. It wasn't dark, as magical lamps were placed at regular intervals along the hallway.

At the end of the hallway stood a solitary door.

However, we couldn't bring ourselves to enter the long, straight corridor.

The staircase had not yet ended.

We could continue going down or enter the hallway and officially venture into the labyrinth.

We could descend for hours, but once we started ascending, we would return to the small training ground on the fifth floor.

We couldn't be certain if there was something in the next passage or behind the door at the end of the corridor.

Once we entered the labyrinth, we might not be able to return.

The spell cast on the labyrinth was unknown even to the resident mages, so bringing a mage along wouldn't make a difference.

"Is it right to enter here…?"

Saviolin Turner hesitated to make a decision, fearing that the wrong choice might make it impossible to return.

Charlotte stared at the door at the end of the straight corridor and sighed.

"That door… It seems so desperate to be opened that it's actually off-putting."

"…I think so too."

The door at the end of the corridor.

It felt like if we walked towards it to open it, we might trigger some sort of trap. We couldn't help but think that way, given how conspicuously the door stood there.

Charlotte pondered.

"I've come this far, I can't not go in."

It seemed like an obvious trap, but it was impossible not to go.

Charlotte entered first, and I followed along with Saviolin Turner.

The interior of the maze wasn't much different than expected. I had imagined the landscape suddenly changing, or the exit disappearing.

“……Since nothing's happening, it feels even creepier."

"True."

Looking back, the entrance we had come in through remained unchanged, and there were no sudden changes in the landscape or our party being separated.

"Still, let's proceed cautiously."

Saviolin Turner took out a scroll from her belongings.

It seemed that she hadn't called a mage because she already had an item that could replace their role.

"It's a trap detection spell."

-Flash!

A bright light emitted from the scroll.

"It seems there are no magical traps detected… But let's be careful, just in case."

Though no magical traps were detected, there could still be physical traps.

If all traps could be detected by such a spell, there wouldn't have been any mages falling into traps.

Soon, Saviolin Turner's body was covered in blue magic power.

"Please keep a distance and follow me."

"Alright."

She kept her senses alert and led the way slowly. If it was a minor physical trap, she could react before it was triggered.

She walked with careful steps, focusing on the walls, floor, and sounds.

The straight corridor wasn't very long, but since we took cautious steps, time passed slowly.

“……I can't tell if there are no traps, or if we're already caught in one."

In the end, we didn't feel any trace of traps as we reached the end of the corridor and approached the door. The entrance we had come through was still there, and it seemed we could leave at any time.

Charlotte looked at the wooden door in front of her and spoke with a determined expression.

"Beyond this door might be the real beginning of the maze."

It was just an ordinary door, without any distinguishing features.

Could Charlotte's words be true, that the real maze begins beyond this door?

Charlotte placed her hand on the doorknob.

"Your Highness. I will…”

"No. I'll do it."

Charlotte shook her head at Turner's words, who was prepared for whatever might happen as she tried to open the door herself.

It was as if Charlotte knew she had to take responsibility for something.

-Creak

Charlotte opened the door.

The expectation that the maze would begin now turned out to be wrong.

“……Huh?"

"Hm?"

“……What is this?"

When the door opened, there was a massive open space.

No matter how you looked at it, it wasn't a maze.

It was hard to call this place a maze.

A huge magical light illuminated the ceiling of the vast open space. We cautiously moved forward into the space, bit by bit.

One could not call this vast, open space a labyrinth.

"What… is this place?"

Charlotte mumbled absentmindedly as she looked around. The space was not entirely empty.

On one side of the vast area, there was a magic circle that seemed to have been drawn on the floor.

In one corner, there was a weapon rack with spears, swords, knives, and maces, among other weapons. Nearby, several training dummies were standing.

"I've never heard of anyone reaching a place like this."

The vast space was not just a single hollow chamber.

Throughout the circular space, there were passages that appeared to lead to other places.

Upon closer inspection, there were no doors, and the insides were clearly visible.

I had an idea of what had happened.

We didn't enter a labyrinth.

We had bypassed the labyrinth and been transported directly to this secret space. I couldn't tell how the labyrinth worked, but it had clearly reacted to either Charlotte or me.

There was no exit in the labyrinth to begin with, and it was evident that only the Archdemon could come directly to this place, not through the labyrinth.

The passages in the hollow space led to various rooms, each serving a different purpose.

We moved slowly, examining each room one by one.

A room that looked like a bedroom.

A room that appeared to be a kitchen.

A library.

An armory.

A room filled with countless potions of unknown nature.

A cultivation area for growing plants.

A storeroom for reagents.

A massive food warehouse.

"What on earth… is this place?"

Neither Charlotte nor Saviolin Turner seemed to know the meaning of this place.

However.

I felt like I knew what this place was.

It was a bunker.

Then, the mystery was finally solved.

Before I took over, Valier must have been on his way here.

In the original story, this labyrinth would not have been revealed to the royal family due to the commander's unilateral decision.

No, even if the royal family knew, it wouldn't matter.

This wasn't a labyrinth in the first place.

Whether it reacted to Charlotte or me, one could not reach this place without coming with the Archdemon.

Soon, this bunker would be safe.

All the premises I had been considering so far collapsed.

In the original story, if Valier had come to this place.

During the great demon war.

Valier Junior.

Would not have died.

CHAPTER 354

The place in the underground labyrinth of the Demon King's castle was a bunker.

"Your Highness… it seems that we didn't actually enter the labyrinth."

"It does seem that way. I'm not sure if we should call it an exit, but we've definitely come straight to a place beyond the labyrinth."

Turner and Charlotte seemed to realize that this was their true destination. It couldn't be helped, since this place didn't look like a labyrinth no matter how they looked at it.

"I think the reason we arrived here is… perhaps the labyrinth only leads the Demon King to the proper place."

"Your Highness…"

Understanding the implications of those words, Turner looked at Charlotte with a sorrowful gaze.

"It seems… I am now, in effect, no different from the Demon King."

It was unclear whether the response was to me or to Charlotte.

Nevertheless, the labyrinth had a path that only the Archdemon could see, and we reached our destination without getting lost in the maze.

Charlotte placed her hand on the bunker wall, looking around.

"Considering this, it's not certain whether this space actually corresponds to the sixth floor of the Demon King's castle's underground."

If the labyrinth were truly the sixth underground floor, they could reach it just by breaking through and descending from the fifth floor.

"Although the entrance to the secret passage appeared to be a simple passage, if it

functions as a dimensional gate, we might have come to a completely different space rather than the Demon King's castle."

As Turner said, there was a possibility that this place was actually very far from the Demon King's castle.

Teleportation couldn't be used in the Demon King's castle, but there was a possibility that warp gates were installed in a limited capacity.

What method it actually was, they couldn't know.

However, what was important was that if some point of the secret passage functioned as a dimensional gate, there was a fairly high probability that it would send intruders into the labyrinth and the Archdemon to the proper place.

But ultimately, the principle wasn't that important to them now.

They had arrived in the secret space of the Demon King's castle.

"A refuge, perhaps… It has that kind of feeling."

"It does seem that way."

This vast space was filled with an enormous amount of preserved food in the storage room.

There were also training equipment for magic and weapons, as well as reagents and cultivation mediums for alchemy.

I explored the bunker with a different sense of unease than Charlotte and Turner.

It was a place where one could live alone for a very long time. At the same time, there was equipment for training.

Most of the books in the library were grimoires at a glance.

Valier would have wanted to come here and would have arrived.

In the original story, Valier would have been alive. Right here in this bunker.

That fact gave off a very ominous feeling.

Demon King Valier Junior, who witnessed the destruction of Darkland, was consumed with a desire for vengeance.

Would Valier, who had once been foolish, sharpen his fangs here to exact revenge on humanity through rigorous training?

If so.

Was it not Cantus Magna nor Akasha, but Valier who caused the calamitous Gate incident?

If I were the cause of the Gate incident, what would be the meaning of everything I did?

Wouldn't it be better for the world if I did nothing at all?

But.

I couldn't know for certain.

I knew that Valier was alive during the original timeline, but there was no evidence to suggest that he caused the Gate incident.

If I do nothing, and it turns out that Cantus Magna and Akasha were the problems, the Gate incident will still occur.

But what if they were innocent? What if my meddling inadvertently caused the Gate incident?

In the original story, Valier would have been a useless fellow. That's what my body's data from back then told me.

Could someone like him, fueled by vengeance, really become a powerful magician capable of causing the Gate incident after merely two years of study? Even when my growth rate is unparalleled in speed, could Valier have grown faster than me? That seemed impossible.

My head felt like it was going to explode.

I had never been so afraid of the unknown future.

“If only the Demon King could enter this place, then the current Demon King could have entered as well,” Turner said, consumed by her own concerns, quite different from my own.

“But why he didn't come here… I don't know.”

The prepared bunker.

I couldn't come here because I didn't know about it.

“He must have decided that it was more important for the previous Demon King to survive than for himself.”

This also seemed a plausible reason.

Rather than surviving and growing stronger himself, it was better to try to resurrect the already powerful Demon King, which is why he saved Charlotte.

And so, the bunker remained in the Demon King's castle, never having welcomed the person who should have come. Charlotte examined each room as she explored the bunker.

“It doesn't seem like there are any extraordinary treasures here. It's a refuge, after all…”

There didn't seem to be any special treasures. Nevertheless, it would be reasonable to expect incredibly powerful weapons or artifacts stored here for Valier.

But then again.

If they had a very powerful artifact, they should have used it to win the war. Hiding a powerful artifact here for future use would be a tacit admission of defeat.

It was possible that there were no powerful artifacts stored here.

Since the Demon King didn't hide here, this bunker must have been meant for Valier. It was a place to buy time for Valier Junior, who wouldn't be of immediate help in battle, to grow stronger in case the Demon King was defeated.

For now, let's set aside the question of Valier's actual capabilities.

At present, I am both a Supernatural and a warrior.

If Valier is the mastermind behind the Gate incident, then he must have studied magic here.

In that case, the place I need to investigate is the library.

If there's a magic book in the library that contains information about a portal to another world…

I just need to burn that book.

Then all my tasks will be easily accomplished.

Cold sweat trickled down my body.

If this place is the root of all problems, I can end everything by burning a few books.

I won't have to deal with dangerous tasks anymore.

While Charlotte and Turner were exploring this place separately, I headed towards the library among the numerous rooms in the building.

The key was this:

If the books in the library were written in the demon language, it would be impossible for me to read them.

So, they had to be written in a common language for me to read without arousing suspicion from Turner and Charlotte.

If a language problem arises, I'll have to bear the inconvenience of coming here alone later.

"…”

The library was quite vast.

Fortunately, it was in a common language, so I could read it well enough.

Books ranging from introductory to very thick volumes were neatly arranged on the shelves.

I didn't intend to study magic.

The book I needed to find was related to another world.

And, if possible, I'd like to find a book about the magic the Demon King had cast on Charlotte. I wasn't yet sure if what happened to Charlotte was truly magic.

There were many shelves, and it would take a long time to scan all the titles of the books. If the titles didn't hint at another world, I'd have to skim through the content as well.

It would be great if I could come back here with someone knowledgeable about magic.

Harriet would be good, as well as Eleris or Lucinil.

This place is Darkland.

Soon, there could be countless magic books or secret texts known only to demons and not humans.

As I passed the introductory books, other magic books caught my eye one by one.

[Book of the Salamandra]

[On Necromancy]

[Introduction to Soul Manipulation]

Soul Manipulation.

I couldn't help but stop in front of that book.

It was a very thick book.

About Soul Manipulation.

It was a book related to the methods of dealing with souls. I didn't know whether it belonged to the general magic system or was the Demon King's secret technique.

However, if the Demon King's soul was indeed within Charlotte, then it must be related to Soul Manipulation.

I carefully took the book out.

While I wouldn't be able to understand the specific magic formulas, I could read the introduction.

[Soul Manipulation is a study of methods to deal with souls. To master it, one must first understand the concept of the soul……]

There were various discussions about what a soul was, but I couldn't understand what it meant as it was written in overly abstract language.

However, I soon reached the part I had been looking for.

[Those who have mastered the art of soul manipulation can achieve what would normally be considered impossible feats, such as dividing an indivisible soul, manipulating the soul of another, mixing souls together, turning a living person into a ghost, or extracting a soul and transplanting it into someone else.]

[However, it should be noted that a perfect understanding of the following texts is also required to perform such acts.]

"…"

Dividing a soul.

It must mean tearing apart the very soul of a being.

Mixing souls.

It implies the ability to mingle the souls of different beings.

The ancient Demon King Valier must have been a master of soul manipulation.

Demon King Valier divided his own soul and placed a part of it into Charlotte.

The magic used on Charlotte was undoubtedly derived from the field of soul manipulation.

I have not yet confirmed the existence of magic related to this world, but I have found other magical texts I needed.

I began to select, one by one, the other texts derived from the introduction to soul manipulation, written in the footnote of the preface.

There were more than six books related to soul manipulation, and their combined thickness was about three times that of an average encyclopedia.

"What… are all these?"

As I began to stack the books on a table in the common hall, Turner and Charlotte stared at them blankly.

"I think the magic used on you is this."

"!"

"Really?"

Charlotte's eyes widened as she looked at the growing stack of books, particularly the introductory text.

"Soul… manipulation?"

"Yes, it seems that even if there are no artifacts here, there are magical texts from the demon world."

In order to strengthen Valier, the library contained texts on powerful magic and other visions from the demon world.

There may not be treasure here, but the real treasure would be the magical texts in the library.

Another thought occurred to me.

If soul manipulation is a magical system unknown to humans, and if the texts in the library contain visions and forbidden arts used by the Demon King and his demonic followers.

Then we could potentially lure Cantus Magna with them.

Whether that's something we should do or not requires careful consideration.

Turner and Charlotte were not mages, but they began to read the introductory part of the preface in the introductory text I had seen.

It was clear that they were gradually feeling the same emotions I had felt.

"A magical system that deals with souls…"

Charlotte's fingertips trembled, and Turner seemed to doubt her own eyes.

Soon, Charlotte read up to the part about what one can achieve once they've mastered soul manipulation, and she clamped her mouth shut.

"I've found it… This… This is it… This was it…"

It is by no means a small amount of content.

But if anyone, be it a royal mage or otherwise, were to master soul manipulation.

Charlotte's condition could improve.

And if that happens.

Even if my true identity is revealed later on, Charlotte will not think that I had helped revive the Demon King.

"Thank you… Thank you, Reinhardt."

Charlotte trembled as she cautiously embraced me, and I hugged her back.

Charlotte would be able to recover.

However.

Having taken on the new problem of the surviving Valier, I could never be at ease.

There were no treasures in the bunker, but books far more valuable than treasures lay dormant.

Magic exclusive to Darkland, or perhaps the Demon King.

There were certainly ordinary magic books, but also books on forbidden magic and books with just the names of unknown spells. Of course, my lack of magical knowledge could be a factor.

"This is… a problem for me, but it's also a major discovery."

Charlotte judged that the true value of the bunker lay in its library, and she was right. Turner, Charlotte, and I entered the library and began browsing the magical books on the shelves.

"It would be a good idea to bring a royal magician here later. Of course… it would be inconvenient for Your Highness to return in person."

Only Charlotte could reach the bunker.

And that would be true. Not just Charlotte, but I would also be able to enter the bunker. If we were to return with an expert in magic, we would properly know the value of the magic books here.

"For now, let's just take books about soul summoning. We don't know what might happen if we release excessively dangerous magic into the world."

"Yes, Your Highness."

Charlotte's position was that, rather than recklessly collecting the magic books, we should be cautious about releasing the dangerous books on the Demon King's magic into the world.

That choice was better for me as well.

If the magic books in this library were to be moved to the royal palace in their entirety, they would slip out of my grasp. These books are important as magic itself, but they also serve as bait for potential future contact with Cantus Magna.

Just as Cantus Magna approached Antirianus because he possessed numerous forbidden spells, I could use these magic books as bait to make contact with Cantus Magna.

Therefore, it's best for the magic books, excluding those about soul summoning, to remain here.

We still don't know whether Valier is the culprit behind the gate incident.

Is it fortunate or unfortunate?

There were no magic books related to the other world, at least not those that we could identify by their titles alone.

The possibility of Valier being the cause of the gate incident was somewhat diminished.

Charlotte's expression as she browsed the bookshelves was quite tense.

"If I return to my original state, I'll never be able to come back here, right?"

"I can't say for sure… but I think that's likely the case."

If the Demon King's soul is removed, it's natural that Charlotte would no longer be able to pass through this labyrinth that only opens for the Demon King.

"Then, let's retrieve these magic books before removing the Demon King's soul from my body."

She believes she can escape the situation where her soul is being consumed.

Seeing Charlotte's expression, filled with such happiness upon finding a clue, made me feel as if, for a brief moment, all my worries had vanished.

CHAPTER 355

At that moment,

Ellen had just returned to the Royal Road after completing her rest in her hometown village of Rezaira.

She was curious about the secrets of her hometown, but her parents had told her it wasn't time for her to know yet.

However, Ellen had acquired two artifacts, just like her older brother, although they were different from his.

The Cloak of the Sun God.

She could have returned earlier, but she had delayed her return to become accustomed to using the Cloak of the Sun God.

More than anyone else, Ellen wanted to show the cloak to Reinhardt first. She wanted to tell him that she had gained another artifact in preparation for the battle against the Demon King.

She hadn't yet decided how to explain the strange occurrences in her hometown village. After all, she would have to explain something she didn't understand herself.

Reinhardt never talked about his own secrets. Could she easily reveal hers?

No.

If anything, she thought that if she shared her own secret, he might feel compelled to share a little about his own in return.

Ellen held onto that vague hope.

Honestly,

She didn't care about anything else.

She had been away for too long, and she wanted to see Reinhardt as soon as possible.

What had he been doing in the meantime? His personality might be bad, but he wasn't lazy, so he must have been busy training in various ways.

Ellen felt restless in Rezaira, wanting to return quickly.

Since she wasn't there, he would have had to practice swordsmanship with someone else. And he must have practiced with someone else.

In Ellen's mind, there were two people who could have trained with Reinhardt.

First-year instructor Saviolin Turner.

Or.

"……"

Fifth-year student, Olivia Lanze.

The thought that he might be training with a senior she disliked made Ellen want to return even sooner. After all, he was prone to strange behavior.

As soon as she passed through the warp gate in front of the temple, Ellen quickly entered the temple entrance.

Would she be scolded for arriving so late?

But she hadn't been away for that long.

Amidst her groundless worries and impatience, Ellen boarded the tram heading to the Royal Class Dormitory.

Of course, he wasn't training with Olivia.

"Reinhardt? I haven't seen him since yesterday."

That was Cliffman's response to Ellen's question about Reinhardt's whereabouts.

No one outside knew that Charlotte, Saviolin Turner, and Reinhardt had gone to the Demon King's Castle.

It was vacation time, so Reinhardt could be off somewhere, and it was not unusual for him to be absent for a few days.

So where had he gone?

Ellen could have waited in the dormitory for Reinhardt to return, and it wouldn't have mattered much.

Nevertheless, she was restless. She wanted to show Reinhardt the new artifact quickly and share her stories.

And also,

She was strong and confident in becoming even stronger.

He would probably get angry if he heard her say it, but Reinhardt was still weaker than her.

If she wanted to.

Feeling truly sorry for the parents who had given up the village's treasure.

Ellen thought that it would be better for her to die than to witness Reinhardt's death.

Would it not be better for Reinhardt to possess the Cloak of the Sun God?

Ellen thought so to herself.

She could give it to him if he wanted.

Ellen longed to see Reinhardt's face when he heard that, out of curiosity.

Where could Reinhardt have gone?

It did not seem like he had told anyone where he was going. Ellen wanted to ask Harriet, but Harriet had also left the dormitory, and it appeared that Harriet was currently conducting magical research in the royal palace.

Ellen did not know what business Harriet had with magical research in the royal palace, but she knew at least that Harriet and Reinhardt were not together.

Then, what next?

-Knock, knock

"Who's there?"

Fifth-year dormitory.

Upon Ellen's knock, Olivia Lanze opened the door and stared at Ellen with a cold expression.

For some reason, Olivia seemed different from before as Ellen looked at her.

Usually, she laughed and teased people, but now there was not a trace of a smile on her face, only a chilly demeanor.

The strange feeling that Olivia Lanze had changed from before was only momentary.

"Do you know where Reinhardt is?"

Ellen wasn't particularly intimidated by Olivia and simply stated her purpose.

“…Isn't he in the dormitory?"

"I heard he left yesterday. I thought you might know."

"Ugh, he's off playing again without telling me."

Olivia muttered as if she was hurt, then smirked at Ellen.

"But I don't feel as bad since you don't know either."

"…”

In the end, Olivia picked a quarrel as usual.

Olivia didn't know Reinhardt's whereabouts either.

Ellen had no more business with Olivia.

"If you don't know, that's fine."

"Yeah, get lost."

-Bang!

Ellen stared at Olivia's door as it slammed shut.

"…?"

This person.

Before, she had the feeling of openly hiding a thorn in her side.

But now, should she describe her as being more like a hedgehog?

Ellen couldn't help but feel that Olivia had changed from before.

As Ellen walked through the fifth-year dormitory hallway, she thought.

Harriet was doing magical research in the royal palace.

Olivia was holed up in her room.

No one in the dormitory knew where Reinhardt had gone.

Then, there was only one place to go. If Reinhardt had not left the capital altogether, there was only one place worth going.

The Rotary Club.

It wouldn't matter if he wasn't there.

She could also spar with the white-haired old lady for the first time in a while.

Ellen left the dormitory she had just arrived at once again.

Ellen was basically not very interested in others.

After becoming close with Reinhardt, things changed a bit, and as she made friends, she tried to take an interest in them.

However, fundamentally, Ellen was generally indifferent and nonchalant about the events happening around her. Therefore, there were only a few subjects she observed closely.

As a result, Ellen didn't know much about what the Rotary Club was specifically. All she knew was that it was a group with a suspiciously strong white-haired lady as their leader.

She had been curious about what the white-haired lady did, but she had never delved deeper than that.

The lady who got angry when called an "aunty".

That was about the extent of her understanding.

What Ellen did know was that Reinhardt's secret was somehow related to the Rotary Club.

The Rotary Club was connected to a thieves' guild, which meant that Reinhardt and his secret were involved with something akin to a criminal organization.

That was about all she could roughly surmise.

The white-haired aunty used to smack her around when Ellen visited her, but lately, there hadn't been much reason to visit.

Ellen left the temple and went to the new headquarters of the Rotary Club.

A connection, however tenuous, had formed between her and the Rotary Club since the incident of Reinhardt's disappearance.

She had recently learned that their situation had improved significantly with the opening of the shops on the magic train.

But what lies beneath the surface of the Rotary Club?

Since Ellen believed that Reinhardt's secret was connected to a criminal organization, she thought the suspiciously strong white-haired lady was the leader of a dangerous crime syndicate.

Because of that misunderstanding, Ellen overlooked some very suspicious facts.

The lady was undoubtedly a criminal, but since she was important to Reinhardt, Ellen decided not to pry.

So Ellen never crossed that line.

At the Rotary Club's headquarters.

"Oh my, if it isn't Reinhardt's girlfriend."

"…?"

Those who lived at the club's headquarters had seen Ellen a few times, so they referred to her that way when they saw her.

Girlfriend.

Ellen couldn't help but tilt her head at the word, but she nodded to the club member who recognized her.

Girlfriend.

Girlfriend.

Girlfriend.

The word strangely echoed in her head.

Then another club member, standing next to the one who had called her Reinhardt's girlfriend, playfully slapped that person’s shoulder.

"Hey, what are you talking about? Reinhardt never said anything like that himself."

"Oops, so the girlfriend is Adriana then?"

"If he trusts her that much…… Doesn't that pretty much say it all?"

Adriana.

Upon hearing that name, Ellen tilted her head even more.

Why would the people of the Rotary Club know about Adriana, her senior who had withdrawn from the temple?

Bang!

"Ouch!"

Suddenly, the door burst open, and someone rushed out.

It was the white-haired aunty.

She ran out with a panicked look, as if fleeing from something.

Her hair was covered in white foam, as if she had been doing something.

“Won't you come in?! You need to rinse out all the foam!”

From inside, an angry shout could be heard.

"No! I don't want to wash my hair! Why do I have to wash it every day!"

"What on earth is that?! Hey, stay still!"

"I can handle my own hygiene…?"

At those words, the white-haired woman exclaimed in surprise before stopping herself abruptly. She had made eye contact with Ellen, who was standing idly in front of the headquarters.

"Um… you?"

Then, someone came running out of the headquarters.

The person's black dress was drenched, although it was unclear what had happened.

“…Um… you are?"

It was Adriana, a senior from the old temple.

Adriana washed her hair first, then dragged the drenched Loyar along to wash her hair too.

Ellen sat quietly in the top floor office of the Rotary Club headquarters.

Ellen didn't know the details, but she was aware that Adriana had withdrawn from the temple.

She also knew that Reinhardt had visited the monastery Adriana returned to because of the withdrawal issue, which was how he knew Harriet's parents.

Ellen had heard from Reinhardt during the last night of the festival that Adriana's original monastery was in the Saint Thuan Duchy.

And on that night.

Ellen had seen both Olivia Lanze and Adriana return to the royal-class dormitory late at night.

She didn't know what had happened or what events had taken place afterward.

However.

Since then, Adriana seemed to be staying at the Rotary Club headquarters rather than returning to the monastery.

It seemed like a matter Ellen didn't need to be particularly concerned about.

But an odd sense of unease was wriggling in Ellen's heart.

Above all.

The expression Adriana had made when she encountered Ellen.

That unmistakable look of embarrassment.

It gave Ellen a hunch that there was some unusual secret.

How much time had passed? Adriana, now wearing a clean white dress instead of her wet clothes, came up to the top floor of the headquarters.

The white-haired woman was nowhere to be seen; Adriana was alone.

Adriana and Ellen weren't particularly close. Of course, their relationship wasn't bad like the one between Olivia and Ellen.

A senior who was close to Reinhardt.

Now gone from the temple.

It was just such an insignificant senior-junior relationship.

"Ah… um… Ellen, right? It's been a while."

Adriana felt the same way, so she sat down awkwardly across from Ellen with a smile.

"Yes, it has been a while."

Ellen had no right to interrogate her.

However, Adriana had come to meet Ellen, who seemed to be waiting for her as if she had no choice but to face her.

"I didn't know you'd be here."

"Ah, well… various circumstances. Somehow…”

Adriana gave an awkward smile.

Ellen was sure that she was not good at lying.

"Reinhardt isn't here, is he?"

Ellen brought up the most important reason for her visit.

Although now, she couldn't tell whether it was truly important or not.

"Um, he hasn't been here before. Is there… something going on?"

At Adriana's anxious question, Ellen shook her head.

"No, I just stopped by to see if he was here since he's not at the temple. There's nothing going on. Even if there is… it's something I don't know."

It wasn't a matter she needed to explain.

However, Reinhardt had been involved in various affairs in places unknown to her. The fact that Adriana was staying at the Rotary Club was likely due to Reinhardt's influence.

Even so, Reinhardt had no obligation to share Adriana's personal circumstances with her.

Yet.

The sight of Adriana and Olivia returning to the temple late at night.

Their tense expressions.

Reinhardt's reaction, as if he knew something.

What could it be?

What was it?

"May I ask why you're staying here?"

At Ellen's question, Adriana fidgeted with her fingertips, grasping and releasing the hem of her dress.

"Well… there was a problem at the monastery I was staying at, so I couldn't be there anymore. So… I asked Olivia for help last time. That led to Reinhardt finding me a place to stay… and that's how I ended up here… Yes, that's what happened."

A person who can't lie well.

Ellen thought that again as she looked at Adriana.

Reinhardt wasn't at the Rotary Club.

Adriana had lied to her.

Ellen didn't press Adriana further, and there was no reason to do so. The white-haired lady barged in with a towel around her neck, whisking Adriana away to somewhere, insisting they had to play together.

Ellen returned to the Royal Class dormitory.

Reinhardt had stepped out for a while. It was a reasonable thing to do during a break.

However, Ellen intended to find out more about this strange situation.

Asking Adriana more questions was impossible due to the white-haired lady.

There was one more person to question.

Knock, knock

Ellen went back to the 5th-year dormitory and knocked on the door.

Click

“…You, again? What do you want? I already told you I don't know where Reinhardt is!"

Upon seeing Ellen, Olivia immediately snapped irritably.

Ellen considered how to begin.

"You were with Adriana last time."

“…What?"

Olivia's already irritable expression hardened further upon hearing that name.

"I have something to discuss with her, do you know where she is?"

Olivia stared at Ellen.

"What is it about? I can pass the message along."

It seemed less like annoyance and more like caution.

"I'd rather tell her directly."

"…”

Olivia stared at Ellen for a moment before abruptly saying,

"She went back to the monastery."

Another lie.

Ellen confirmed that both Adriana and Olivia had lied to her.

"Is that so?"

"Right. Even if I tell you where it is, it'll be hard to find. Unless it's really important, it's best not to worry about it…”

"That senior. Adriana."

Ellen tilted her head.

"I just met her at the Rotary Club on my way here."

“…What?"

At Ellen's remark, Olivia's expression became even more hostile.

"Senior."

Ellen looked straight at Olivia.

She induced her to lie, and after finding the weak point,

"Why didn't you come to the Miss Temple Contest?"

Ellen asked the most important question.

CHAPTER 356

The reason for not participating in the miss temple contest.

Olivia, whose attitude had already changed from her usual demeanor, looked down at Ellen with cold eyes.

"Why do you need to know?"

"Because I'm curious."

"So why should I tell you?"

Olivia seemed as if she would strike Ellen if she pressed further, her hostility not even allowing for the slightest opening.

Killing intent.

Ellen was truly feeling killing intent from Olivia right now.

"There's no reason for you to know. We're not even that close."

"Didn't you tell Reinhardt?"

Ellen insinuated that it must be related to the Rotary Club where Adriana was, given Reinhardt's involvement.

In response to Ellen's rational suspicion, Olivia pulled Ellen into her room.

-Thud!

Ellen, who was abruptly dragged into Olivia's room, found herself pressed against the closed door and faced Olivia's gaze.

"Yeah, Reinhardt knows. But what's your reason for knowing?"

"Riverrier Lanze died."

"…"

Ellen looked at Olivia.

"And that day, your whereabouts are unclear."

"So what? Are you saying I killed him?"

"I didn't say that."

Riverrier Lanze was killed by an attack from demons.

"I just have an absurd suspicion, and if you could make me believe it's true, that would be enough."

A plausible lie, if it was a lie.

Why you returned to the Royal Class dormitory late at night with Adriana that day, and why Adriana is staying at the Rotary Club instead of the monastery.

Whether Riverrier Lanze's death on the day your whereabouts were uncertain was a coincidence or not.

Why you lied.

What reason you had for having no choice but to lie.

All you have to do is tell a story that plausibly fits those pieces together.

However, such a lie cannot be fabricated instantly.

Olivia, with Ellen pressed against the wall, looked down at her as she stared back without fear.

"If I kill you, Reinhardt will never see me again."

"…"

Even in the face of the word "death," there was no fear in Ellen's expression.

Olivia's fingertips trembled.

She could make an extreme choice, but in doing so, she would lose the most precious thing.

Olivia had lost everything.

She did not want to lose the last precious thing she had left.

This reckless junior was trying to grab her by the scruff of her neck.

She showed no signs of backing down. She seemed to have a strange suspicion, although it was unclear what she was thinking.

If this girl spoke carelessly, not only herself but also Adriana and even Reinhardt would be in danger.

What should she do?

As Olivia stood at the crossroads of confusion and extreme choices, Ellen quietly opened her mouth.

"I'm no different."

"…"

"Though I dislike you, if you get hurt, Reinhardt will be sad."

Ellen looked at Olivia.

"I won't do anything to hurt my senior either. I'm just curious. What happened that day? Why is everyone lying?"

They dislike each other.

Nevertheless, knowing that Reinhardt would be saddened if either of them got hurt, neither Ellen nor Olivia would do anything to harm the other.

So even if I find out something, I won't hurt you.

Olivia had no choice but to know that Ellen's words were sincere and truthful.

Because of the strange resonance those words had for her, Olivia couldn't properly look into Ellen's eyes.

Nervously nodding her head, Olivia spoke as if to throw up.

"Ellen."

“…Yes?"

For the first time, Olivia called Ellen by her name.

"Promise me you'll keep the secret."

"I'll keep it. No matter what it is."

It wasn't Olivia's secret that Ellen was curious about.

She wanted to know what secret of Reinhardt's was entangled with it.

It had become too hard for her to be in the dark, to worry and feel sad alone.

"I was there."

"…!"

"When the demons attacked, Adriana and I were there."

It was an absurdly vague suspicion.

An unbelievably absurd suspicion, but hearing the truth that surpassed even that, Ellen could only be astonished.

In Olivia's room, Olivia sat in a chair, and Ellen sat on Olivia's bed as they talked.

Olivia told everything. Starting from why they were there at that time, she recounted the entire story that unfolded after that.

"The Five Holy Religions… Independence?"

"Yes, I think they were planning something like that. My stepfather tried to blackmail me to be its first Empress and used Adriana's life as bait for that. That's why we were there."

Ellen listened blankly to the unbelievable wickedness of Riverrier Lanze.

The demon knight raid.

Ellen had thought that Olivia might have been involved in the incident somehow, but she had no idea that the two of them were at the scene.

There was only a vague suspicion due to the faint similarities between the dead and Olivia, and Adriana.

However, the stories that followed plunged Ellen deeper into shock.

“…They saved you?"

"Yes, I don't know why. A winged demon saved Adriana and me. And then it dropped us off somewhere far away and disappeared. That's the end of it."

"Why on earth…”

"I'm the one most curious about that."

Just as Ellen couldn't understand the situation, Olivia was still confused about the problem.

"You understand why I have to keep this story a secret, right?"

“…Yes."

If someone found out about this story, regardless of the reason, they would undoubtedly face enormous misunderstandings. It was clear that they would suffer from vicious slander and suspicion that they had conspired with the demons, and the possibility of death was very high.

"The next day Reinhardt came looking for me. He asked what had happened, so I

explained the situation… Then he said he would help Adriana."

“…I see."

Elen felt uneasy at those words.

She thought Reinhardt seemed to know something about the pair.

But after hearing the story, it was clear that Reinhardt couldn't have known at that point.

A misunderstanding, perhaps.

Just because you think you know someone well doesn't mean you truly do.

So, the feeling she had gotten from Reinhardt that day must have been a mere illusion.

Then, Reinhardt not attending the Miss Temple Contest that day must have been unrelated to Olivia.

In reality, the suspicion that Reinhardt might be the Demon King is not a thought that could arise within the realm of normal thinking.

Reinhardt met with the two the following day, and after a long time, they talked. He learned about the incident the day before and entrusted Adriana to the Rotary Club for her protection.

It turned out that Adriana hadn't entirely lied.

She was indeed unable to return to the monastery.

A newly discovered problem.

The demon attack.

Olivia and Adriana had been there, and for some reason, the demons had saved them.

But why?

"What reason would the demons have to save you two?"

“…I don't know."

Olivia frowned.

"Maybe they just felt sorry for us."

“…Excuse me?"

"Do you think demons are always evil and wicked?"

Olivia had been bitterly disappointed in humans, which led her to abandon a human-centric way of thinking.

"Demons could be more virtuous than humans, right? There are countless humans far more terrible than demons or devils, like my late stepfather."

Olivia spoke with deep contempt.

Someone hearing Olivia's words might consider them dangerously sympathetic towards demons.

Demons are evil.

Because they are evil, they must be eradicated.

This is a crucial axiom among humans and an irrefutable common sense.

It's natural to make enemies hateful and intolerable. That kind of hatred regenerates and spreads infinitely among people without being intentionally fostered.

Demons are the enemy.

That's why the notion that demons are evil is inevitable.

Humans have an instinct to define their enemies as beings that must be killed, rather than just being allowed to kill them.

Olivia and Elen might be somewhat free from such common sense, but they could

never be entirely free.

However.

Olivia was almost unique among those who had participated in the Great Demon War in thinking that demons might actually be virtuous.

"Do you know why the previous demon attack happened, not this time, but before?"

"No."

Olivia was disappointed in humans.

She couldn't even understand what made humans better than demons.

Now, she was almost reaching the point of thinking that demons might be superior beings to humans.

"You know that the Holy Knights were the ones attacked during that incident too, right?"

"Yes."

Olivia stood with her arms crossed, narrowing her eyes as she stared out the window.

"The alliance has distributed the captured demons among themselves. They even opened a black market to auction them off."

"Captives? Why?"

Ellen couldn't grasp the reason for distributing or handling the captives in such a manner.

"To use them as slaves. There are demons that resemble humans, you know. Among them are the attractive ones like succubi and incubi. They cut off the horns of those demons, destroyed their magical circuits, and reduced them to mere cripples, only to use them as slaves."

"Ah…"

"Empires and subordinate states, as well as the holy knight orders and the five major churches, all received their share of captives. They claim it's for research, but that's just an excuse. I don't need to explain what they're really using them for, do I?"

Olivia spoke with a tone of disgust, implying that she didn't even want to mention the vile acts. Ellen nodded blankly in agreement.

"Back then, the demon raid wasn't aimed at attacking the holy knight orders. It was an operation to rescue the captured demons. And while there were injuries, they didn't kill any of the knights."

A raid to rescue the demon captives.

All groups distributed the demon captives to be used as slaves.

"Only a small portion of the demon captives were rescued. The empires, subordinate states, royalty, and nobility are probably using those demons in unspeakable ways. They say it's because they're enemies that deserve to die, but in reality, they're fulfilling their own filthy desires. How is that not disgusting and repulsive?"

"…"

Ellen lost her words at Olivia's intense tone.

"That's right, whether the Demon King is resurrected or a successor exists, they can't bear to see their own people being treated like that. They went so far as to do such things with just a handful of demons. And yet, they didn't harm any of the holy knights. I think the Demon King's actions are actually more noble, don't you?"

"Senior, that's enough."

As Olivia's expressions grew more aggressive, bordering on advocating for the Darkland forces, Ellen cautiously took Olivia's hand.

There was no reason for Olivia to act like this.

If Olivia crossed the line and displayed such behavior in front of others, it would be truly dangerous.

Olivia hadn't expected Ellen to comfort her in this manner, and she stared at Ellen

with wide eyes.

"I think I understand what you're trying to say."

“…Alright."

Olivia took several deep breaths to calm her emotions.

"That's what the demon who saved me said."

Olivia murmured absentmindedly, as if recalling that moment.

"Humans, how can they be so wicked?"

The flying demon appeared with those words, killed the knight who had detained Adriana, and whisked Olivia away from that place.

As she soared through the sky, Adriana could see the demons casting a massive destruction spell on the abandoned monastery.

"I never thought they intended to attack in the first place. Maybe they were just watching. But they must have heard everything. They heard the stories coming from there. They heard about using the adopted daughter as bait to restore honor, and the life of a nun who hadn't even become a priestess yet as bait. They heard the threats to keep killing my precious ones until I surrendered."

Olivia, who had begun to view the demons more favorably, wanted to believe that they were kinder beings than humans, having saved her.

As she looked at the Nameless Monastery committing such blatant acts of injustice.

Perhaps they couldn't stand the heinous wickedness, malice, and injustice, and that's why they intervened.

"So, I'm imagining that they didn't attack the Nameless Monastery to destroy it, but rather saw what was happening while spying and came to save Adriana and me. I'm having such an absurd fantasy."

That they might have attacked to save Adriana and Olivia.

In the end.

Although some parts of the process might be wrong, Olivia's thoughts were a very close guess to the truth.

Are the demons truly good or evil?

After hearing the disgusting stories about the demon prisoners and learning the truth about the two demon raids that had occurred so far, Ellen couldn't make sense of anything.

The stories she had heard from Olivia weighed so heavily on her mind that she had completely forgotten about Reinhardt's problem.

Reinhardt had tried to help Adriana. That's why Adriana was at the Rotary Club instead of the monastery.

The two were rescued by the demons.

Within the relationship between stories, Ellen couldn't deduce an even scarier truth. The distance between truths was too far, so she couldn't find the connection.

She now knew for certain why Olivia had not participated in the Miss Temple contest.

Even Olivia herself thought it wasn't a situation where she could care about such things.

Olivia was uneasy about having revealed a secret that many people should not know, even though she knew Ellen had grasped some clues.

Because she had told a dangerous secret to someone who didn't particularly like secrets.

"You must keep this secret."

"I'm not the type of person who takes advantage of such things."

Ellen might not like Olivia, but she didn't hate her enough to want to kill her.

If this became known, not only would there be a huge backlash, but Olivia and Adriana could genuinely be accused of colluding with demons and face execution.

The guilt might spread to Reinhardt, but even if it didn't, Ellen had no desire to use this secret.

At Ellen's words, a frown appeared on Olivia's forehead.

"What? So you're saying I'm that kind of person?"

"I never said that. Why? Feeling guilty?"

"No! I'm not that kind of person!"

"Seems like you are, though."

"I said I'm not!"

Feeling embarrassed, Olivia's face turned various shades of red and blue as she sputtered.

Annoyed, Olivia crossed her arms and grumbled.

"Anyway, you should consider yourself lucky. If I hadn't been unable to go, you wouldn't have become Miss Temple."

"…"

If Olivia had actually participated in the Miss Temple contest, there was no telling how it would have turned out. However, being Miss Temple was certainly a good thing for Ellen.

Strictly speaking, it wasn't a pleasant memory.

After all, she hadn't been able to show the person she wanted to impress the side of her she wanted them to see.

"So, are you happy?"

"About what?"

"About winning Miss Temple."

At Olivia's question, Ellen stared at her intently.

Is she teasing me right now?

What was the point of asking her how she felt about winning the Miss Temple contest without Reinhardt there?

"What did Reinhardt say?"

But to Ellen's eyes, Olivia's expression didn't seem like that of someone who was teasing her.

It was a look of envy. Olivia was curious and perhaps even jealous about what Reinhardt might have said after seeing Ellen's carefully prepared appearance and her victory as Miss Temple.

And Ellen realized this.

"He didn't come."

"What?"

Olivia didn't know that Reinhardt hadn't attended the Miss Temple contest.

"Reinhardt, he didn't come."

“…What?"

Olivia couldn't help but be bewildered.

Olivia had assumed Reinhardt would have gone to the Miss Temple contest. He had told her to wait in her room, as if he had something planned for her.

She herself had had no choice but to rush out when she received the letter from the Riverrier Lanze.

"Why not?"

"How should I know?"

Ellen responded irritably to Olivia's question. Just as she herself hadn't been able to go to the Miss Temple contest, Reinhardt hadn't attended either.

"Why didn't he come?"

“…I don't know."

Was it enough to say she didn't know and leave it at that? Wasn't she curious?

Olivia found Ellen's response strange.

"Didn't you ask?"

“…No."

It was a reasonable question.

It was appropriate to ask why he hadn't come. It was a question that could be asked.

But Ellen hadn't asked Reinhardt why he hadn't come. She had forgiven him without even asking in the first place, knowing he wouldn't have answered. She still wasn't sure if that was something to be forgiven or not.

She had let it go.

Olivia looked at Ellen with her mouth slightly open.

"Wow, you… Are you kind or just dense…?"

"What?"

Reinhardt hadn't attended the Miss Temple contest, and Ellen hadn't even asked him why.

Olivia now knew that Reinhardt was involved with the strange organization called the Rotary Club.

Reinhardt had his own secrets, and sometimes, unavoidable situations would arise. Perhaps it was an extension of one such situation. Olivia could only vaguely guess.

What made her upset was the fact that Ellen knew more about Reinhardt than she did, which was only natural.

And so, it was quite displeasing to Olivia that they were the kind of friends who would bury and move on from secrets that couldn't be shared.

Of course.

Olivia looked at Ellen, who seemed gloomy, her eyes downcast as she thought about the Miss Temple contest.

"I don't know about anything else…"

Olivia tried to show a warm and tender smile as she looked at Ellen.

Thinking about Ellen waiting for someone who wouldn't come, Olivia felt a mix of emotions – sadness, amusement, and pity.

All sorts of complicated emotions welled up inside her.

"You really are a mess."

Of course, ultimately, the dominant thought was that she was a mess.

"Shut up."

"Can I cry? No, wait, didn't you cry? If I were in that situation, I would have been so heartbroken and wronged that I would have sobbed uncontrollably."

"I said shut up."

Ellen glared at Olivia with gritted teeth.

As expected, she really disliked this person.

CHAPTER 357

Imperial Arcane Library, Emperatos Magic Department.

The sheer volume of magical research materials stored in the Magic Department was so vast that one could wonder if a lifetime would be enough to read them all.

And that was just for the field of dimensional magic alone.

However, having access to the royal magic department's archives was not just about being able to peruse the precious tomes stored within the library.

One could also summon professional magicians who had already fully understood and internalized these books, to assist in comprehending the content, and receive expert help to provide specific research materials for abstract inquiries.

It was as if Harriet was studying like an emperor.

"Imaginary dimensions?"

"Yes, Your Highness."

And so, Harriet was reminded once again, after a long time, that she was indeed a noble, and quite a high-ranking one at that.

While at the academy, she had been scolded and reprimanded by a rascal from a poor background, but she was originally of such a lofty position. The highly esteemed royal magicians, who held positions of great authority and power, would address her as "Your Highness" and would carefully share their knowledge, anxious not to offend her.

Of course, it would be different if the rascal were not there.

Among her classmates were the Crown Prince, Princess, and even a prince from the Kernstadt royal family.

Though it was against school rules to use one's rank to suppress others, there were

still classmates of similar or higher status.

Thus,

Harriet was happily studying, her noble pride swelling after a long time.

At the mention of the term, Harriet tilted her head.

Imaginary dimensions.

It was the answer she received when she asked for an explanation about the incomprehensible part while learning about the warp gate system.

"In other words, it refers to a dimension that is assumed to exist, even though it doesn't actually exist."

"Uh-huh… So, we're assuming it exists even though it doesn't?"

"Yes."

"Why do we need such a concept?"

At Harriet's question, the research magician began to explain slowly.

"Bidirectional one-time-use dimensional gates do not require such a concept. Once activated, they close after a certain period. However, the warp gate system is a shared network of permanent multi-directional dimensional gates."

To simplify the understanding, the researcher drew a diagram on a piece of paper placed on the table.

[Gate - Gate]

"With such a structure, it's more convenient to create it as a one-time-use gate. There's no need to set up the concept of an imaginary dimension. Setting aside the complexity of the magic itself, isn't the structure quite simple? There's only one connection between the gates."

"I suppose so."

"But if there are three gates, how many total connection paths would there be between them?"

"Three, right?"

Suppose there are three gates: Gate A, Gate B, and Gate C. The connections between each gate would be A-B, A-C, and B-C, making a total of three connections. Since the connections are bidirectional, the order of the gates doesn't matter.

"What if there were four gates?"

"Then there would be six connections."

And so on.

"As the number of warp gates increases, won't the number of paths increase exponentially?"

"Yes, that's correct."

"It's not that every warp gate is connected in this way, but the number of connections between gates already exceeds two hundred thousand."

“…That's an incredibly large number."

Hearing the researcher's words, Harriet couldn't help but be taken aback. She hadn't known the extent of the connections between the warp gates.

"The warp gate system is the largest magical system in the history of the continent. Therefore, a common space perception system was needed to determine which path to set for the permanent dimensional gates and which gates to connect. That's why we created a virtual map called the Imaginary Dimension."

A virtual map.

If you created a dimensional gate on your own, there would be no need to share it with anyone. It would be a one-time magic based on your own thoughts.

However, the warp gate system is no different than a collaborative architecture created through the cooperation and collaboration of many magicians.

Everyone needs to have the same map or blueprint in their heads in order to add or modify something in the warp gate system, and that is what's called the Imaginary Dimension.

The understanding of the virtual map or blueprint of the Imaginary Dimension that researchers have accumulated so far.

A virtual dimension that is assumed to exist but does not actually exist.

An understanding of it is necessary to access the magic of the warp gates.

"This is the most recent map of the Imaginary Dimension."

The researcher unfolded a huge flat map in front of Harriet, which covered the entire table and more.

It wasn't just a simple drawing of dots and lines.

The map was filled with complex strings of characters, detailing each dimensional gate, their connections, properties, as well as the blocking properties, usefulness, and connection strength.

Although it was a map of something that did not exist, this map changed the course of human history.

Harriet suddenly wondered.

Another world.

What exactly is another world?

The researcher said directly that the Imaginary Dimension is a non-existent dimension.

“…So, this isn't an actual existing dimension?"

It's just a virtual concept created to help the common understanding of future magicians and modern researchers, and should ultimately be understood as a blueprint.

"Yes, that's why it's called the Imaginary Dimension."

The researcher nodded at Harriet's words, as if it was obvious.

"However, nowadays, some argue that we cannot definitively say that the Imaginary Dimension does not exist."

“…What do you mean?"

"Dimensional gates are ultimately magic that connects space to space directly. The basic principle does not change even if there are hundreds of dimensional gates."

Harriet understood this as well.

"But isn't there an intermediate space that's skipped over when connecting the dimensional gates?"

"Intermediate space…?"

"We use the gates, but the gate itself doesn't exist at either the entrance or the exit. It's treated as a phenomenon."

The researcher pondered, resting his chin on his arm.

"However, the gates can only be passed through; we can't touch or reach the gates themselves. We can control and manipulate them, but it's unclear whether the phenomenon of the gates belongs to our reality or something else. Some say that warp gates don't actually skip over space, but rather pass through some sort of intermediary area within the space, and that this area is a real space according to certain magicians."

"Hmm…”

Warp gates.

Traversing them shortens the space, but the gates themselves are a peculiar phenomenon that can't be touched or reached at either the entrance or the exit.

One can use gate magic, but what exactly is the nature or phenomenon of the gates?

Is the intermediary area passed through when using warp gates a real space or not?

It was clear that this issue had not been definitively resolved.

"Some argue that imaginary dimensions have actually emerged due to the distortion of the dimensional concept caused by the constant operation of warp gates leading to system saturation, but these are just speculations."

The researcher gazed intently at the map of the imaginary dimension.

"The important thing is that the warp gate system has spread far too rapidly due to its convenience. This large-scale magic hasn't been properly tested for potential dangers."

As Harriet had previously sensed.

The warp gate system is a very dangerous magic, but its convenience allowed it to spread rapidly without proper risk assessment.

That's why, even now, with the long history of warp gates, magicians have varying opinions on them.

No one could predict what form the catastrophe they might bring would take, making the situation even more uncertain.

Furthermore.

Harriet looked at the vast virtual map in front of her with a sense of dread.

"This map of the imaginary dimension… Not just anyone can see this, right?"

"Of course."

The researcher spoke quietly.

"Without the royal family's permission, even if you desired it, Your Highness, you wouldn't have been able to see it."

Although she appeared nonchalant, Harriet was looking at one of the empire's most crucial secrets.

Understanding the imaginary dimension would enable one to interfere with the warp gate system.

Soon.

It's possible to use it for ill purposes if one so desires. That's why, if Harriet understands the map of the imaginary dimension and comprehends the warp gate system completely, it means that Harriet can tamper with the warp gate system as she pleases if she has bad intentions.

"Do you think… it's just my imagination… that the warp gate is too dangerous a magic?"

"I think so too."

The researcher sighed.

"However, the warp gate has already become an indispensable item for humanity."

The warp gate was convenient.

Thus, even if people knew the dangers of the warp gate, it wouldn't disappear, and this was the reality of the continent at the time.

After collecting books related to soul absorption magic, Turner, Charlotte, and I returned to the Imperial capital.

We told the commander that we found nothing in the labyrinth. We only mentioned that we returned safely.

No one saw what we found since we had secured the magic books in the saddlebags tied to our horses beforehand.

We decided to keep the underground labyrinth of the Demon King's Castle a secret.

Uncertainty had turned into conviction.

Charlotte was indeed possessed by the soul of the Demon King.

Her current state was no different from that of an Archdemon.

The Demon King had separated his soul using soul absorption magic and fused it with Charlotte's soul.

Whether there was a way to separate them, Charlotte would entrust the analysis of the soul absorption magic to trustworthy royal magicians and find a solution.

"You did well, Reinhardt. Thank you."

“…I didn't do anything in particular."

I hadn't directly helped Charlotte. It seemed that Turner and Charlotte were eager to return to the palace as soon as possible to analyze what they had acquired this time.

There was no reason for me to stick around any longer, and there was nothing I could do.

Before catching someone's attention, I parted ways with the two of them and set out on my own path.

I gained more from this return to the Demon King's Castle than Charlotte did.

There was a bunker in the underground of the Demon King's Castle.

Therefore, Valier wouldn't have died.

And through the numerous magic books there, I would be able to summon Cantus Magna.

I had gained a lot, but my concerns had also grown.

What exactly had the Valier of the past done? Cantus Magna and Valier could both be unrelated, one of them could be involved, or both could be connected.

Had Valier tried to make contact with Cantus Magna like I'm doing now?

Let's assume so.

Valier had used his vast magic knowledge as bait to make contact with Cantus

Magna.

Then, Cantus Magna finally completed Akasha through that magic, and it caused some incident. That would be the gate incident.

It's too much of a leap.

But I couldn't be sure that it wasn't the case?

However, I couldn't be certain that it wasn't the case.

And there was one thing that I regretted deep inside.

Soul Absorption Magic.

There was certainly a story about the fusion of souls within it.

What happened to Charlotte could be related to that as well.

Lucinil said she wanted souls.

Wouldn't it be possible that the answer to bestowing a soul upon a soulless being lies within the Soul Absorption Magic?

Although Charlotte was the first one who came to mind, after calming down, I realized that Soul Absorption Magic might be a necessary spell for Lucinil as well.

But now, all the magic related to Soul Absorption has left my hands.

If I finish researching it and find a way to restore Charlotte's original state, will I be able to retrieve the magic books on Soul Absorption?

What excuse should I use if I do get them back?

I didn't think it was a hasty decision, but since Lucinil is helping me, I'd like to help her in some way as well.

The underground labyrinth of the Demon King's Castle.

The bunker.

I would have to share this information with Lucinil and her collaborators and make a decision about Cantus Magna as well.

Amidst these thoughts, I returned to the temple.

"Oh, you're back."

As I returned to the Royal Class dormitory, Ellen was staring at me in the lobby.

You're back.

"You're the one who's back."

Ellen looked at me with a puzzled expression.

"Where have you been?"

"Uh…"

Another secret?

Ellen asked, but her expression showed she didn't really expect an answer, a somewhat resigned look.

She knew better than to expect anything from me, so even asking took courage, but her expression showed she'd accepted that such courage was useless.

At this point, shouldn't I be able to tell her?

Although it might be rude to Charlotte, Ellen already knew that I was helping Charlotte in some way because of the emperor.

I looked around and, after making sure no one else was close enough to hear, whispered softly to Ellen.

"Well, it's hard to explain in detail, but it's because of Charlotte's problem."

"…Ah. Yeah."

Ellen seemed quite surprised that I actually gave her an answer.

"It wasn't dangerous."

"Okay. I got it."

Ellen looked up at me, her voice slightly choked with emotion.

"Thanks for… for telling me…"

"…"

What's the big deal?

Even though I hadn't fully explained the situation, Ellen seemed touched that I shared even a little bit with her, and her eyes welled up with tears. Seeing her like that, an inexplicable emotion welled up inside me.

Trying to shake off the strange feeling, I looked at Ellen with an intense gaze.

"By the way, how was your trip home?"

"Oh, right."

Ellen gasped as if she had just remembered something, then grabbed my arm.

"I have something to show you."

"Huh? W-wait a moment."

"Hurry up."

Ellen suddenly began dragging me somewhere.

A short while later.

I was drawn into Ellen's room and found myself blankly staring at the cloak draped over her body.

"What is this?"

"Lapelt."

Ah.

Um.

That thing.

Isn't it that?

"The cloak of the Sun God."

"Oh, right, that."

My brain froze.

"Why do you have that?"

"I brought it from home."

Um.

That thing.

I don't think that's the kind of explanation one should give.

"Why was it at your home?"

"I don't know."

I'm getting dizzy.

"Mom gave it to me, saying I might have to fight the Demon King."

This is too dizzying!

CHAPTER 358

Elen confidently claimed that she had received the relic of the Sun God as if it had been a lunchbox from her mother.

The situation was so absurd that it was almost comical.

"Was there no Alicion?"

At my question about the absence of the relic of Riter, the God of Courage, Elen brought her index finger to her lips and tilted her head.

What's going on?

Usually, her actions would make her look cute, but today was different.

"I don't know. I don't know if they had it but didn't give it to me or if they just didn't have it."

What on earth is she talking about?

"Isn't your house in a rural area?"

"Yes."

Why would there be a relic in some remote village in the countryside of Kernstadt?

"Why would there be a relic in some remote village in the countryside of Kernstadt?"

Realizing that it wasn't an unreasonable question, I just blurted it out.

"I'm not sure. My mom and dad just gave me this one and didn't explain anything."

A hero and the hero's sister.

I had thought there might be some backstory, and it seemed clear that there was a mysterious background to it all.

Come to think of it.

She had said before that her family was naturally powerful.

Was that a foreshadowing of sorts?

Seeing that I was too bewildered to speak, Elen began to pout.

"I'm more curious. I'm not saying I can't tell you because I can't, but I really don't know."

Elen made it clear that it wasn't that she didn't want to tell me, but that she couldn't. She seemed hurt.

She made me feel guilty.

"No, no… I'm not angry… I just don't understand. Would you believe it if you were me?"

A rural village with two heroes.

Well.

The original story did have some settings that defied logic, so it might be possible that this became even more illogical now that it had materialized.

Perhaps this was added to make it more plausible.

Anyway, the cloak of the Sun God.

On the collar of the flaming cloak that Elen was wearing, as with any other relic, there was a phrase that only I could read.

[Burn with hatred.]

Hatred.

The chilling word froze me in place for a moment.

I now knew what the phrases etched on the relics meant.

The inscription on Tiamata.

[Purify the world with rage.]

In my anger, I was able to draw out the true power of Tiamata.

Even though I was not a priest, I could use divine power.

Then hatred.

Was the cloak of the Sun God a relic that responded to hatred?

And another thing.

I wanted to see it again with my own eyes.

“…Show me Lament."

"Okay."

At my request, Elen summoned Lament into her right hand.

The Moon Sword Lament.

[Forged with tears.]

Tears represented sorrow.

The Sun God's cloak Lapelt

And hatred.

“…Why Lament?"

Sorrow and hatred.

Can the two coexist?

"Just, I was curious how cool it would be if I had both."

"…?"

They can coexist.

If anyone can, I can evoke both emotions in Ellen at the same time.

Faced with the new topic of Ellen's hometown, my ominous imagination was growing.

Last time, during the Demon War, Ragan Arthurius left Lament for Ellen. Since I hadn't set that intention, I couldn't know why Ragan Arthurius left Lament for Ellen.

However, in Ellen's hometown, there was even a relic called the Cloak of the Sun God.

Considering how much more could have been given, it's rather odd that two relics were left behind for the battle against the Demon King.

What kind of place is Ellen's hometown?

I can guess that it too, ultimately, belongs to some kind of secret organization.

Because Ellen is still young and may not be able to keep secrets, her parents didn't tell her the truth about the village.

Well, it makes sense since she brought this from home and told me directly. Of course, I don't know if she would tell others.

I have a bad feeling.

Cantus Magna.

There's no law that says they only collect magic.

In some sense, they might need relics, and in fact, powerful forces are embedded in relics, even if they're not magic.

Ellen's hometown…

It might be Cantus Magna.

If so,

What am I supposed to do?

Ellen looks at me and speaks quietly.

"Did you… miss me?"

“…Huh?"

Her question was so sudden that I couldn't help but be startled. As I remained stunned, a slight pout formed on Ellen's lips.

"I… missed you."

She looked at me as if urging me to answer quickly.

Her expression seemed to want something else instead of asking questions.

I don't know why she's acting like this.

"Of course I missed you…”

At my words, Ellen smiled bashfully.

It was a brief moment, but her smile erased all of my worries.

Ellen obtained a new relic, the Sun God's Relic, Lapelt.

With this, she became the only person on the continent to possess two relics since Ragan Artorius.

"It's better to keep this a secret. If it becomes known that I have it, it'll only cause more trouble."

“…Yeah, you're right."

Ellen seemed to be contemplating something, then she unsummoned Lapelt.

The Empire had arranged for Ellen to enter the temple, knowing that she came from Ragan Artorius's birthplace.

If I think about whether the Empire knows that Ellen's hometown is an unusual place, I lean towards them not knowing.

If it became known that Ellen had brought the Sun God's cloak from her hometown, there was a possibility that the royal family would unnecessarily pay attention to the matter.

If her hometown were Cantus Magna, it would be best not to meddle, as it would be better for the empire not to know this fact; and if not, it would still be better to leave it alone, as it was a place where there was nothing good to be gained by stirring things up.

In the end, Ellen's parents didn't tell her much.

Ragan Artorius originally hadn't intended to go on an adventure, but rather to search for something. As a result, he learned too much about the world and could no longer leave it be, according to Ellen's explanation.

It was clear that Ellen's hometown did not interfere much in the affairs of the world. Thus, her parents did not provide any special assistance when their son went off to fight the Demon King.

An unknown secret organization and Ellen's hometown.

Despite feeling an ominous premonition, they had no choice but to remember it for now.

Ellen returned, bearing the Sun God's cloak.

Charlotte began researching a way to recover her condition using the Soul Absorption magic she had discovered in the Demon King's bunker.

And then there was Harriet de Saint-Touan.

The next day, I received a shared report from Harriet about what we had learned so

far.

"An imaginary dimension?"

"Yes."

Listening to Harriet's explanation, I couldn't help but tilt my head.

"It's a theory about a dimension that doesn't actually exist. It's like a virtual map set up to maintain the warp gate system."

“…I don't quite understand?"

"Ah, you blockhead."

“…Suddenly?"

I was taken aback by the sudden jab, and Harriet seemed satisfied with her surprise attack, grinning mischievously.

No.

Did she really have to do this now?

"No, but isn't this unfair? As soon as we start talking about magic, there's no way I won't be a blockhead!"

At my words, Harriet snapped back.

"So you're saying I'm really a blockhead, huh?!"

"No, I didn't mean you were stupid when I called you a blockhead… Um, yes, I'm sorry."

It wasn't my place to tease her endlessly about being a blockhead.

"Listen carefully, I'll explain it properly."

With newfound confidence, Harriet began her explanation.

Knowing I wouldn't understand even if she used technical terms, Harriet explained everything in a simple, step-by-step manner that I could comprehend.

As I listened to her explanation, it was surprisingly easy to understand.

It was like a subway map.

Subway maps are drawn without considering the actual distance and terrain between stations. They are created solely for the convenience of the viewer, regardless of the actual terrain.

Although the imaginary dimension was for the designer rather than the user, making it different in that aspect, it was not much different from a subway map in that it was a map created for the sole purpose of being convenient to view, regardless of reality.

"Do you understand what I'm saying now?"

"Ah, I understand."

"…"

Harriet glanced at me with a skeptical look, as if to say, 'There's no way you understood.'

No.

I couldn't explain the subway map properly, but I did understand!

"Anyway, this imaginary dimension doesn't actually exist, but there are many formulas and magic spells created based on the assumption that it does. That's why magicians involved in the maintenance of warp gates have to first understand the imaginary dimension."

A new concept called the imaginary dimension.

"Wait, so if one becomes familiar with all these imaginary dimensions and such, could anyone interfere with the warp gate system?"

"Well, in a way…"

At my ominous words, Harriet also muttered quietly, as if she felt an ominous premonition as well.

"But there's not much to worry about because even if someone understands the imaginary dimension, interfering with the warp gate system isn't easy. Constructing warp gates themselves isn't too difficult, but only a select few magicians, chosen from the entire empire, can interfere with the core operation of the gates."

It's not difficult to build or manipulate machines, but meddling with the system itself is a challenging task.

"So only the elite of the elite, and a carefully chosen few royal magicians, have the authority to interfere with the warp gates themselves."

Considering how convenient and dangerous the warp gates are, it makes sense that the empire had to be diligent about security.

That means that Harriet's access to the concept of the imaginary dimension this time was quite extraordinary.

And it was not her request, but mine.

As the bearer of the royal crest, I have access to the empire's top secrets. It seems that trustworthiness checks were deemed unnecessary since I had saved the princess's life.

"But it seems that even among specialized researchers, opinions are divided."

"Divided?"

"Some people think that the imaginary dimension might actually exist."

"What?"

At those words, I felt a chill run down my spine.

"But this hasn't been studied extensively, so it's only conjecture at this point…"

Harriet furrowed her brow as she spoke about what she had heard.

"People wonder, where do the gates actually exist? It seems that this question is the source of the divide."

"Where do they exist? Aren't they right in front of us?"

"The gates themselves are both the entrance and the exit. But they don't actually exist in either the entrance space or the exit space. It's as if they exist somewhere in between, but where exactly is that?"

The gates exist simultaneously in both the exit and entrance spaces.

A gate, by nature, has two states in a single space.

"So the question is, which dimension does the gate we see actually belong to? And when we pass through the gate, we experience a slight delay. You know that, right?"

“...Huh."

For a brief moment, one can feel as if they are passing through something while going through the gate.

"During that transition, researchers call it the 'space's byway.' Even the experts don't know where that space actually is."

Though people use the warp gates, it seems that even the researchers don't have a complete understanding of the magic behind them.

"So, they hypothesized a virtual dimension called the 'imaginary dimension' and created the warp gate system. But now, there are claims that it might actually exist. Whether it came into existence due to the increased use of warp gates, or if it was always there, we can't tell."

Harriet crosses her arms and looks at me.

"So, even though this is all just idle talk and more of a guess than actual research, if there is another world, and it's the imaginary dimension, wouldn't you think that neither people nor anything else would live there?"

The byway of space.

If such a thing truly exists, it would simply be a space of nothingness that exists only as the concept of the imaginary dimension. Harriet seemed to conclude that while it could be another world, there could be no existence of otherworldly beings.

"Anyway, there's nothing certain, so I'll look more into it. In the end, I think we'll only learn more about the warp gates, whether it's about another world or not. It's not like I want to become a warp gate technician."

Harriet explained the purpose and method of the warp gates she'd discovered, but the things she actually needs to understand likely require a higher level of intelligence. And it seemed quite clear that she was grasping that at an incredibly fast pace.

"Is it boring?"

"No? Who said it's boring?"

Harriet spoke as if there was no reason to dislike the situation, where she could access the empire's greatest secrets as easily as eating a snack.

Although she doesn't want to become a warp gate technician, Harriet is an honor student who believes that the more magical knowledge one has, the better.

"Anyway, I don't think the warp gate system has much to do with the other world you're curious about."

No.

I felt like I was actually getting closer to finding the right thread.

However.

There were too many clues, and each event carried its own risk, so it was impossible to be certain which was the real issue.

Warp gates.

The imaginary dimension.

Cantus Magna.

Akasha.

Black Order.

Valier Junior.

Ellen's hometown.

There were so many scattered clues everywhere that my head felt like it would burst. Harriet stood up, as if she'd explained everything she needed to.

"I'm going to check on the progress at the Magic Research Society. Want to come with me?"

"Why not."

Since it would be quite an accomplishment if either the power cartridge or Moonshine were completed during this winter break, I got up from my seat to follow Harriet.

As we left the dormitory to head towards the Magic Research Society, a familiar face was waiting at the entrance.

“…Professor?"

With a look of mild surprise, Harriet greeted Professor Epinhauser, who had come to the dormitory.

Although she knew that the teachers in charge of the Royal Class didn't necessarily have time off during vacations, she wasn't too astonished by his visit.

As always, the cold and aloof Professor Epinhauser glanced at me and gestured with his chin toward the dormitory exit.

"Reinhardt, come with me for a moment."

Harriet looked at me with a hint of regret and whispered quietly,

"I'll fill you in on the research club's matters later."

"Uh… okay."

What could he possibly want with me during winter break, especially when there are no classes?

Is it something to do with Saviolin Turner or Charlotte's problem? Those two had just returned to the Spring Palace to continue their research on the Soul Manipulation Magic. My assistance might be needed if Charlotte's power causes an outburst, but for now, the research is the priority.

Stepping out of the Royal Class dormitory, Professor Epinhauser walked quietly beside me.

The instincts of a problem child.

"Did I… cause any trouble, by any chance?"

I couldn't help but be nervous when my homeroom teacher called for me.

But I haven't caused any trouble lately, right? The last time was with the incident involving Oscar de Gradias.

Although it wasn't exactly trouble.

Would participating in the cross-dressing contest be considered as such?

As I pondered,

"Why did you cross-dress?"

"!"

I felt as if my head had turned to stone at the sudden, piercing question.

No way, was it really about that?

Did Bertus tell him?

Or did he naturally know since he's a teacher?

Could it be those student council jerks?

Professor Epinhauser didn't seem to be scolding me or prying into the matter.

It seemed he was just genuinely curious.

"Well, that's… um… about that."

As the professor watched me silently, he shook his head.

"Never mind. If that's your idea of fun, I don't need to worry about it."

"No, no?! It's not, um, fun? It wasn't like that?"

I was going crazy!

When will they stop tormenting me over the cross-dressing contest?! Now that I've gained magic mastery talent, do they want to punish me more?

"If it's not for fun, then what's the reason?"

"Ah, no. There was, um, a situation. Well…"

In the end, all I had was a pathetic excuse that it was for money!

"Forget it. What I really wanted to ask you wasn't about that."

"Then what…?"

"Have you prepared the information on Cantus Magna?"

"!"

At those words,

It felt as if all the blood in my body had turned ice-cold.

CHAPTER 359

"Is the information on Cantus Magna prepared?" Master Epinhauser asked, and I was unable to respond for a while.

Epinhauser was a member of the Black Order. He did not press for an answer. It seemed as though he thought it was surprising enough that I would need time to calm my mind.

The Black Order had seen me with Lord Vampire.

It turned out that Master Epinhauser knew I was not a mere Temple student ever since the death of Aaron Mede.

Did that mean that someone in a black robe who contacted me back then was actually Epinhauser?

It wasn't a fitting concern given the situation.

Were you the one who called me a pretty boy?

Despite such thoughts, it felt as if a knife was pressed against my neck.

With just one word from Master Epinhauser, everything could have come crashing down long ago.

He may not have known until recently that I was the successor of the demon realm, but figuring out who I was in relation to the current state of the empire wouldn't have been difficult once he saw me controlling a vampire.

It seemed my true identity had already been exposed.

Master Epinhauser, known as a patriot, had left me alone.

What was the Black Order, and what did they want?

I realized a simple truth: I knew less about the Black Order than I did about Cantus

Magna.

I had experienced many instances of fear.

The fear of losing something, the fear of dying – I had felt them all.

But.

Although I thought I could lose everything I had at any moment.

Realizing that everything I had could have vanished at the mere decision of the Black Order sent chills down my spine.

In the midst of a fear unlike anything I had ever experienced before, I stared intently at Epinhauser.

"Why… did you leave me alone?"

"We do not act recklessly."

In every moment of attending ordinary classes, training, and bustling around during festivals, I could have lost everything.

The Black Order had been watching me.

They must have known that I was the next Demon King.

"Is there information on Cantus Magna?"

What would they do without it?

Would they forcefully take it? Or would they threaten me by saying they would end my Temple life?

I had approached the Black Order on equal terms, not using any honorifics.

But in front of Epinhauser.

Somehow, I felt suffocated, like a mouse in front of a cat.

He wasn't particularly oppressive, nor did he show any signs of interrogating or intimidating me.

Just as when I first met his eyes, he gazed at me with a cold expression and calm eyes.

And that plunged me into endless fear.

The one thing I knew for certain: The Black Order wanted information on Cantus Magna.

"I have it. I'm not sure if you already know…"

"Is that so?"

I possess the information they desire.

What I have been seeking is information about the dimensional gate to another world.

"Unfortunately, we do not possess any information or magic related to the dimensional gate that leads to another world."

The Black Order is unaware of the magic I desire.

However, they can force an answer out of me, or I must be prepared to expose the whole truth and leave the temple.

It has been possible since the Black Order learned that I controlled a Lord Vampire, not because Epinhauser was a member. Yet, I had a strange certainty that they would not choose such an option.

"You have the information we need, but there is nothing we can give you in return."

Then, the negotiation must fail.

"Let me ask you this. We don't have the information you truly seek, but if you provide us with information about Cantus Magna, the Order is willing to fully cooperate with you. Through that, you might find what you really want."

"…"

The Black Order has no knowledge of the magic related to the dimensional gate to another world.

However, they are willing to take my side if I provide information about Cantus Magna.

"What will happen if I refuse?"

Epinhauser gazes at me quietly.

"Nothing will happen."

"However."

"We will be watching you."

At those words, I felt a chill run down my spine.

They know my true identity.

Yet, they say they will merely watch without acting on it, not revealing my identity or anything.

What could it be?

What kind of organization is the Black Order?

Are they seeking the destruction of Cantus Magna?

Or something else?

Magic fanatics are indifferent to worldly affairs, remaining loyal to their own principles and goals.

Nevertheless, they say they will quietly withdraw if they cannot obtain information from me.

What does it mean that they will continue to watch me even after that?

I am the Demon Lord who infiltrated the Temple Royal Class. The fact that they will continue to watch me, regardless of the negotiation, suggests that the Black Order is not indifferent to the world.

"What is the Black Order's purpose?"

Upon hearing my question, Epinhauser remains silent for a moment, then finally speaks.

"I have not yet determined whether I should tell you that or not."

He has no intention of telling me.

"However, we have not yet deemed you an enemy."

They haven't decided whether to act against me since they are a group that does not move hastily. That means they still have doubts.

From the moment I made contact with the Black Order, I entered their domain. I had always been prepared for such a dangerous situation. After all, I cannot only deal with safe matters in safe places.

Little did I know, however, that the truth of Master Epinhauser being a member of the Black Order was concealed.

If they were to join me in tracking down Cantus Magna, they would become my allies.

Otherwise, they would watch over me and possibly label me as an enemy and attempt to eliminate me based on their judgment.

The hand of the Black Order.

Is it truly the right decision to grasp it?

But my identity has already been exposed, and the fact that Master Epinhauser discovered it is merely a surprise; I was somewhat prepared for this situation.

After all, I have created many allies with uncertain identities.

There is no reason not to accept an ally with an unknown intention.

It's not a situation where I can be picky about who I join forces with. Time is running out, and the gate crisis is approaching moment by moment.

Their intention to join hands with me is clearly for surveillance purposes as well. Otherwise, there would be no reason to say they would watch over me.

"Very well. Let's cooperate."

For now, I will join forces with the Black Order and track down Cantus Magna.

What comes later is, after all, a matter for later.

After the important, yet empty, negotiation had concluded, Master Epinhauser looked at me with his usual expression and spoke seriously.

"Alright, let me ask you again."

“…Yes."

Do I have to reveal the secret of Cantus Magna?

But what if the Black Order just takes the information and then leaves me high and dry?

Master Epinhauser asked me.

"Why did you dress in drag?"

No.

Please stop tormenting me!

Master Epinhauser and I took a walk in an uneasy atmosphere.

He didn't ask me why I needed the magic to open a dimensional gate.

The setting I wrote must be true.

Master Epinhauser is a patriot. That's a fact.

If there is a connection between Master Epinhauser being a member of the Black Order and being a patriot, is the Black Order an organization related to the empire?

It doesn't seem likely. The Emperor, Charlotte, and Bertus don't know my true identity. So, the Black Order may be related to the empire but not to the royal family.

Somehow, I only feel like a mouse in front of a cat when I'm with him.

I've formed a strange alliance with the Black Order and the remnants of the demon world, but fundamentally, I see this man as my teacher.

However.

The Black Order has already discovered my identity, my life hangs in the balance, and I decided to cooperate because I ultimately need their power.

But instead of asking about Cantus Magna,

Why do they keep asking why I dressed in drag…?

Are they just trying to torment me by asking that instead of focusing on something more important?

The Demon Lord infiltrated the Royal Class, barely surviving in hiding, and even won a cross-dressing contest?

Wow…

Even I think it's curious…

What crazy thought drove me to do that?

But.

There are positions and situations for each of us, aren't there?

But why do they keep asking about my reasons for participating in the cross-dressing competition, rather than asking for information about Cantus Magna?

Epinhauser didn't press for an answer, and I walked silently beside him, a dying expression on my face, not knowing what to say, as if I were a sinner.

I want to die.

This is a whole different dimension of embarrassment from being found out by Bertus.

At least Bertus only discovered that a fellow student had cross-dressed.

Black Order, capable of inciting a continental-scale war, discovered that I had the audacity to kill Riverrier Lanze and participated in a bizarre cross-dressing competition before that incident.

"Do… do I really have to tell you?"

"If possible."

"But why?"

Teacher.

I think I'm going insane.

Can't you just say things like, "What's your wicked intention, what are you trying to do by opening the gate, I've already figured out your dirty schemes and true identity?"

Damn it.

Why on earth do I have to explain my reasons for cross-dressing to a suspicious, mysterious member of a secret organization like you? And why are you even curious about it?

Epinhauser looked at me and spoke.

"Are you embarrassed?"

"…"

"I asked if you're embarrassed to explain why you cross-dressed."

"Of course, I am!"

If this is how it's going to be, just kill me! It feels like I'm being mentally murdered!

"That'll do."

“…Pardon?"

"I said that'll do."

I was wondering why I had to explain my reasons for cross-dressing, but if it's embarrassing to talk about, it's fine.

What on earth does he want from me? Why is this question so important?

"Why… are you doing this to me?"

"I was just curious about what you thought of your life at the temple."

“…Excuse me?"

Could it be?

Did he want to know if I had discarded my identity and dignity as the Demon King, and cross-dressed solely for personal hobbies and desires?

Was he curious about whether I was genuinely committed to my life at the temple?

Somehow.

I'm not sure about the details, but…

Did participating in something like cross-dressing make the Black Order think I wasn't a very dangerous person, or something along those lines?

He's the Demon King, but he's a pervert who's genuinely into cross-dressing, so he

doesn't seem to be that dangerous.

Something like that?

If that's the case, it's a good thing.

But why…

Why does it feel so humiliating?

CHAPTER 360

And perhaps it was because the questions were too bizarre.

The atmosphere should have been heavy, but it didn't feel that way at all. Instead of the Demon King and the Black Order fanatics, it still felt like a student-teacher relationship.

But they couldn't continue this conversation forever.

"Before I share information about Cantus Magna, there are a few things I'd like to know."

"Ask away. If it's a question I can answer, I will."

"You're not a magician, are you?"

Epinhauser.

He is not a magician.

So, the first Black Order member I encountered, right after killing Aaron Mede, couldn't have been Epinhauser.

As for the person I met during the cross-dressing contest, it could have been Epinhauser or not.

The magician is Mr. Mustlang, the B-class homeroom teacher.

It's not like the A-class teacher is a member of the Black Order and Mr. Mustlang is a member of Cantus Magna, is it?

Why would he join the Magic Order if he's not a magician?

"There's no reason it has to be a magician only."

That's all Epinhauser had to say. I don't know the conditions for joining the Black

Order.

But the previous Aaron Mede was just the tip of the iceberg. I don't know what rank Epinhauser holds within the Black Order, but it's certainly not the same as the tip of the iceberg since he revealed his face and made contact with me.

"What's the relationship between Cantus Magna and the Black Order?"

"Cantus Magna wants the Order's Elixir. That's why they relentlessly try to track us down."

"Are there actual battles taking place?"

"Yes, the history of power struggles between the Order and Cantus Magna is quite deep."

The long-standing conflict between Cantus Magna, which had coveted the Elixir, and the Black Order was extensive.

This means that Cantus Magna would be the ones attacking the Black Order.

The Black Order was known for its sinister and dangerous magic, while Cantus Magna was known for its positive image as Elixir hunters who ambushed such magicians.

Of course, it's true that the Black Order possesses dangerous magic and Cantus Magna attacks them, so it's not as if incorrect information has spread.

However, what wasn't known was that Cantus Magna's actions were no different from robbery against the Black Order.

That's why one of the Black Order's goals was to find and destroy the Cantus Magna's base, which coveted their Elixir.

"So, what's the information on Cantus Magna?"

"It's the reason they're collecting the Elixir."

At that, Epinhauser stopped walking and stared at me intently.

"Their goal is to complete an artifact called Akasha."

"…"

The Black Order might have already grasped this information since Antirianus knew it.

He stared at me for a moment and then spoke briefly.

“…Akasha? I've never heard that tale before."

Epinhauser nodded silently.

It was clear that even the Black Order had no knowledge of this information.

This raised another question.

The Black Order, which had been opposing Cantus Magna for a very long time, had been unaware of Cantus Magna's true intentions all this time.

Antirianus spoke as if he had only briefly entered and exited Cantus Magna.

If Antirianus was able to learn of Akasha's existence from his short-term activities, it made no sense that the Black Order, even as enemies, hadn't known about it until now.

Antirianus could have been active in Cantus Magna for much longer than he had said.

"Where did you get that information?"

Master Epinhauser asked.

If Antirianus had been active in Cantus Magna for a long time, he might have hunted the Black Order under Cantus Magna's name.

Soon.

Even if it happened decades or centuries ago, Antirianus might be considered an enemy that the Black Order would want to eliminate.

If a former insider of Cantus Magna provided the information, it was possible they would try to kill that source.

"I'm sorry, but I cannot reveal that."

I couldn't afford to cause tension in an already uncertain alliance.

"If we cannot be sure of the source, the credibility of the information will inevitably suffer."

"I don't think this information is entirely accurate either."

In the end, it was possible that Antirianus had lied to me, and given that he wasn't entirely trustworthy, the story about Akasha might not be true either.

"However, I do know that Cantus Magna's goal is to complete an artifact named Akasha. They say it's an artifact that can contain magic. I don't know what will happen once it's completed, but it certainly won't be ordinary. And, among the numerous magics contained within, there might be something I desire. That's what I believe, at least."

I didn't know exactly what Akasha was, so my words were like grasping at straws. However, considering the Black Order didn't know about Akasha either, it was clear that Cantus Magna had kept their secret well-guarded for a long time.

Except for the one slip-up involving Antirianus.

"Hmm… This unexpected information requires verification."

Master Epinhauser spoke.

"I don't know about all types of ancient artifacts either, so I will look into whether the Order has any related information."

In fact, Epinhauser was a member of the Magic Alliance but was not a magician himself. Even though he didn't know the exact location of the Order's headquarters, there must be more information there.

"Does the Order know how to contact Cantus Magna?"

"If I knew an easy way, I wouldn't have contacted you."

This answer was expected, so it wasn't too disappointing.

There were times when they found us, and times when we found them, but just as they couldn't pinpoint our core, we couldn't pinpoint theirs either.

There may have been small skirmishes and isolated battles, but there had never been a full-scale war.

Cantus Magna would surely like to raid the Black Order's headquarters, seize all the magic they possess, and fill Akasha with it.

And the Black Order would want nothing more than to raid Cantus Magna's headquarters and annihilate those pesky adversaries.

Yet, such events hadn't transpired so far.

"You've probably heard rumors that the Black Order conducts wicked dark magic or experiments."

"Yes."

Could it be?

"Those rumors are nothing but false information spread by the Order itself to lure Cantus Magna into a specific area or location."

It was almost unbelievable that all those bizarre rumors about the Black Order were fabricated by the Order itself.

They would even go as far as to tarnish their own reputation in order to kill their enemies.

The Black Order was willing to tarnish their image to annihilate their enemies, spreading strange false rumors they had created to draw Cantus Magna in. Did that mean there were no actual instances of civilian massacres and such?

"So they didn't actually use things like forbidden magic?"

"Of course, to bait them, magic they aren't aware of must actually be performed or exist in that location. They aren't the type to bite at just any bait. The outcome was sometimes successful, sometimes a failure, but ultimately, we couldn't reach their core."

Epinhauser quietly gazed at the trees lining the street.

"I won't say that there haven't been any casualties caused by the Order. Some forbidden magic inevitably involves sacrifices… However, there's no reason for me to explain that to you."

Epinhauser stopped talking, seemingly thinking it odd to justify casualties to a demon lord infiltrating the human realm.

No.

First cross-dressing, now being treated as an evil being? It's absurd.

Anyway, I don't know the Black Order's true purpose.

However, it was clear that due to the endless struggle with Cantus Magna, the annihilation of Cantus Magna had become one of the Black Order's top priorities, putting their true objective on hold.

It wasn't much different from Antirianus' situation.

Using forbidden magic as bait to lure Cantus Magna.

There's the cooperation of the Black Order, who have been fighting Cantus Magna for a long time.

"They don't fall for every bait. And if their goal is to complete some sort of artifact, setting the wrong, overly large bait could result in them completing the artifact."

We also had to consider the possibility of failing to respond to Cantus Magna's attack.

As long as we didn't know what Akasha was, putting up a huge bait that they couldn't resist might lead to even more unforeseen situations if we failed.

First and foremost, it seemed urgent to find out what Akasha was.

I established a cooperative relationship with the Vampire Council.

Following that, I also built a cooperative system with the Black Order.

It was quite a shock to learn that the Order's representative was none other than Professor Ephinhauser.

While each situation carried its own anxiety, everything began to roll slowly, according to my intentions.

It wouldn't be strange for my identity to be revealed at any moment now. After all, I had no choice but to expose myself in order to join hands with numerous groups.

Professor Ephinhauser silently watches me.

"Reinhardt."

He calls me Reinhardt, not Valier.

Of course, he probably doesn't know that my father, the Demon King, shares the same name, Valier, so he addresses me as such.

Ephinhauser looks at me quietly and speaks.

I can't tell what emotions lie behind his emotionless gaze.

However, he called me Reinhardt, not the son of the Demon King.

"Do not make foolish choices."

In that one sentence, I felt many emotions that I could not discern from his expression.

What does he mean by a foolish choice? It seems I might already be making them.

He still seemed to think of me as his student.

I couldn't tell what Ephinhauser or the Black Order wanted.

I didn't know what they expected from me.

However, since he still treated me as a student,

"Yes, Professor."

I treated him as my professor as well.

The connection to the Black Order lies with Professor Ephinhauser.

I don't know how he communicates with the Order, or what kind of activities he's involved in.

Although the settings I've written are factual, the unwritten parts are filled with things I don't know.

Professor Ephinhauser is a patriot.

It is uncertain whether his patriotic nature is related to the Black Order.

However, the Black Order definitely cannot be an anti-imperial organization. After all, my description of Professor Ephinhauser as a patriot must be true.

But if they are a pro-imperial organization, why would they spare me? Do they think my existence could somehow help the empire?

For now, they seemed to be extremely cautious when it came to dealing with me. To the extent that they would rather cooperate with me to annihilate Cantus Magna, I was not yet completely out of the Black Order's sight.

Professor Ephinhauser's advice is not to make foolish actions.

It could be interpreted that depending on my actions, the Black Order's response or attitude towards me could change.

Professor Ephinhauser will report to the Order's headquarters, or something similar, about Akasha, and if there's any clue to be found, he will find it.

If not, I will lure Cantus Magna out using the gold mine the Black Order has or the gold mine I have as bait.

I can prepare a gold mine of a tremendous scale that they will have no choice but to fall for. Then, a situation akin to a full-scale war would unfold.

Either the Black Order and my forces will be shattered, or Cantus Magna will be.

One of two situations would unfold, and Akasha's fate would be determined then.

Time passed.

Amidst anxiety and impatience.

"Have you been acting a bit strange lately?"

During the school break, Liana de Grantz, who had been staying at the dormitory for a few days and then going back to the Duke's residence, initiated the conversation.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you always seem a bit off, but recently, it's like… hmm…"

Liana looked at me with her arms crossed and muttered.

"Should I say you're like water mixed with alcohol, or alcohol mixed with water?"

Although it wasn't a fitting analogy for someone her age, it wasn't too bizarre considering it was Liana, who was most likely drinking alcohol at home.

"I guess I'm just a bit tired."

"Really? What are you doing that's so exhausting during the break? Just relax."

"I'll manage."

"Well, suit yourself."

With that, Liana went somewhere else. It wasn't necessarily because of training. Of course, I wasn't not doing it either.

The anxiety that this life would someday come to an end.

It seemed that was what made my recent behavior appear somewhat odd.

“…Did you ask me something?"

"No, it's nothing."

Like when I just stared intently at Ellen's face without doing anything during training.

"What, what is it all of a sudden? Do you have something to say?"

"Uh? No?"

"Ah, you startled me…”

Or when I suddenly patted Harriet on the shoulder while having various conversations at the Magic Research Club's mansion, causing her to jump in surprise.

"Reinhardt, let's go on a date!"

"Sure."

“…Huh?"

"Where should we go?"

"Uh, um. Uh? Oh, I'll think about it now!"

When Olivia unexpectedly proposed a date that I would normally reject, I simply agreed without hesitation.

Even in my own opinion,

I had indeed been acting like a screw was loose.

CHAPTER 361

Reinhardt is acting strangely.

"Right?"

"Yeah."

"So…"

"I, I'm not sure…"

Ellen, Liana, Harriet, and Adelia were gathered, discussing this matter.

Lately, Reinhardt seemed a bit odd.

It wasn't necessarily a bad feeling. Harriet spoke with a flushed face.

"Th-the other day, suddenly, he… um, what should I say? He looked at me, and… his gaze was somewhat…"

"Sensual?"

"Yes! That's it! That's the feeling!"

Harriet exclaimed in agreement with Liana's comment.

Reinhardt's default expression was always somewhat sullen.

But in recent days, everyone felt something odd about him.

He had a distant, dreamy look in his eyes, as if he had seen it all.

He hadn't picked any unnecessary fights during these days either.

If anything, his gaze was tender and intense.

Of course, some people felt embarrassed when he looked at them with such eyes, like Harriet de Saint-Owan.

Some were worried and tried to comfort him, like Ellen Artorius.

And then there were others, completely different.

"It's annoying."

Liana de Grantz was more irritated than surprised.

"No, the other day, I had a bit too much to drink at home and my stomach wasn't feeling well, and suddenly he told me, 'Don't drink too much, you'll get diabetes.' What should I say? Huh? This, this is… anyway, it was the first time I ever felt so disgusted by someone's concern."

He used to tell her to mind her own business.

And now that he was suddenly acting kindly, Liana was not only shocked but also disgusted.

'Has he gone mad? Why is he acting like this all of a sudden?'

'He's probably worried, that's all.'

As Liana showed her disgust, Reinhardt added more fuel to the fire. Liana's face turned pale, and she mumbled to herself.

"That bastard… he's not suddenly going to die, is he? They say when people suddenly change, they die."

"No, no way!"

"It's a superstition."

"Well, it can't be…"

At Liana's words, everyone had their own reactions.

They all knew that Reinhardt was acting strange lately, but they didn't know why he

seemed so down.

"Should we… do something for him?"

Liana tilted her head, merely suggesting. Ellen asked in response.

"Like what?"

"Well… when feeling down, other than eating and drinking, I'm not sure what else there is…"

What else could they do for someone who seemed so down for no apparent reason?

Although Liana was irritated and disgusted, she was still worried about Reinhardt.

They all began to think about what they could do to help Reinhardt, who seemed so down.

Whether or not it would actually be helpful to him was another matter.

For a long time, he had thought that there were too many things to worry about. Of course, he expected that there would be even more in the future, but as the pressure began to bear down on him, it was becoming increasingly difficult to pay attention to every aspect.

The Black Order agreed to support me for now, but I couldn't be sure of their true intentions.

Perhaps it would be wiser to leave the temple of my own accord.

As Lucinil said, I would become increasingly dangerous, and the number of people who would learn my true identity would grow one by one. Depending on who finds out, it could lead to irreversible consequences.

Wouldn't it be better to simply leave the temple instead of risking such a tightrope walk?

However, there was a reason I had to stay in the temple as long as I could keep my

identity hidden.

"I've only been at it for a few days, so I can't be sure, but it seems to be going smoothly."

"That's a relief."

Class B dormitory.

Those were Charlotte's words as she calmly sipped her tea.

The analysis and research of soul-binding spells would help remove the Demon Lord's soul that resided within Charlotte.

Until then, I was the only one who could handle her if her powers went out of control.

Aside from those practical issues, I didn't want to leave the temple, but I knew that it was just my personal desire and ambition.

"For now, I've kept the matter of the labyrinth beneath the Demon Lord's castle and where I got the book a secret. It might be revealed eventually, but for now, no one knows."

The labyrinth beneath the Demon Lord's castle.

The existence of that place itself wasn't a problem.

But the fact that only an Archdemon could enter it was the issue. If it were revealed that Charlotte was now no different from the Demon Lord, she wouldn't be safe.

I wanted to stay in the temple until Charlotte's problem was resolved.

But I couldn't be sure if that was possible.

"By the way, have you had any problems lately? Like a fight with the others…?"

"Huh? No."

"Hmm."

Charlotte must have sensed something from my appearance, as she cautiously asked. Showing a demeanor too different from usual might cause issues as well.

Noticing that I seemed a bit distracted, Charlotte quietly took my hand.

"Everything will be alright. Don't worry."

Her words were similar to what I had often told her.

I suddenly wished that Charlotte had a familiar too.

Winter Palace.

Bertus's office.

"I anticipated this, but it seems we've reached a dead end."

Bertus neatly arranged the completed reports and placed them tidily next to the table.

The Riverrier Lanze incident.

Although they could guess the identity of the attackers, their whereabouts remained elusive. The Demon Lord's intentions were also unclear. The report he received now stated that the investigation into the Riverrier Lanze incident would continue, but it had ultimately hit the limits of the inquiry.

The Demon Lord's successor exists.

And there was a high probability that it was a certain boy who had saved Charlotte. Where had that boy gone?

The boy, who had vanished as if evaporating in the middle of the imperial road.

Both Charlotte and Bertus had tried to trace his whereabouts but had failed to find him in the end.

At this point, the re-emergence of the Demon King was working in favor of the

empire, but as long as they couldn't ascertain the nature of the Demon King's existence, they couldn't be too pleased with the reappearance of the empire's once-vanished enemy.

How could they reach the remnants of the demon world's forces?

That was what concerned Bertus.

"By the way, Your Highness, about Reinhardt, the one you mentioned before…"

"Silence."

As soon as Reinhardt's name was brought up, Bertus furrowed his brow deeply.

"Don't talk about that guy for a while."

In life, there are memories that cause damage just by thinking about them.

For Bertus, right now, the name "Reinhardt" was one of those memories.

Cross-dressing.

Why, really? What was so regrettable about it?

There was no reason, evidence, or any grounds for Reinhardt to have to do such a thing.

He claimed it was for the money, but the prize for the cross-dressing competition wasn't all that significant. In reality, the Rotary Club was raking in money with a claw, so how much help could the prize money from a mere cross-dressing contest be to the club's finances?

In other words, there was no other reason for Reinhardt to do it, at least not that Bertus could think of, other than because he wanted to.

Reinhardt cross-dressed.

Why?

Because he wanted to.

No matter how much Bertus thought about it, there was no other reason!

To Bertus, Reinhardt was that kind of person.

He cross-dressed and wanted to show it off to others, even participating in a competition.

"…"

People tend to give up trying to understand things that go beyond their own judgment.

Bertus gave up trying to understand Reinhardt.

Giving up meant not being curious about or thinking about him any longer.

Along with an order to stop investigating the silver-haired girl immediately, Bertus was trying hard not to think about that madman called Reinhardt.

In the current situation, Bertus's abandonment of any thought about Reinhardt was, in effect, a blessing for Reinhardt.

"Still, I believe this is something you need to know…"

"I told you not to speak of it."

Due to the significant emotional damage, Bertus planned not to go near the dormitory until the end of the winter break.

Seeing the prince's apparent discomfort, his subordinate hesitated.

It seemed like something they couldn't help but bring up.

"Well, I will only tell you this."

"Hmph, fine. What is it?"

With an attitude that suggested he was prepared for severe reprimand if it were a trivial matter, Bertus's subordinate reluctantly spoke up.

"He has received the royal crest."

“…Hmm?"

Bertus tilted his head.

It was a completely unexpected statement.

The royal crest?

“…You mean Reinhardt received it? The royal crest? From whom? My sibling?"

Bertus was aware that last time, Charlotte had lent her royal crest to Reinhardt when he went to Darkland.

"No, Your Majesty personally gave it to him…”

"From His Majesty?"

The imperial crest.

To be granted this directly from the Emperor was not a loan, but a bestowal.

The owner of the crest was treated as one would treat a member of the royal family.

In other words, it was only natural that simply possessing the crest would grant one immunity and privileges in most matters.

There were no specific or detailed laws regarding how royalty should be treated, as it was rather ambiguous.

Therefore, to be treated as royalty meant that one was entitled to receive more than the treatment bestowed upon any privileged class in the world.

Thus, it was only natural that not just anyone could receive or possess the imperial crest, and those who did must have made an extraordinary contribution to the empire.

For instance, people who no longer existed in the world, such as the hero Ragan Artorius and his companions.

But now, Reinhardt had received it.

"Didn't we have an event last time where students were invited to the imperial palace in connection with the Temple Festival?"

"Ah, yes. It's an annual event."

It was a rather ordinary event that took place every year. The tournament winners from each grade at the Temple School were invited to the palace, where they were honored and encouraged. This year was no different.

Reinhardt was the first-year Temple champion.

"Could it be that it happened then…"

"Yes. Not only Reinhardt, but also Ellen Artorius received the imperial crest."

"Ellen? But she didn't participate in the tournament this time, did she?"

"This time, the winners of the Miss and Mister Temple Contest were also invited."

"Hmm. I see."

Bertus hadn't been interested in such matters, as he was preoccupied with other issues at the time. So he had only just found out that Ellen was the winner of the Miss Temple Contest.

Bertus could see the bigger picture.

The winners of the Miss and Mister Temple Contest were not originally invited to the imperial palace.

The Emperor must have deliberately invited Ellen, knowing that she was the winner, in order to bestow the imperial crest upon her.

"I can understand Ellen, but why Reinhardt?"

Ellen Artorius.

The younger sister of the hero, possessing outstanding talent and growing at an

astonishing rate. In this uncertain situation where the Demon King might be resurrected, Ellen was someone the empire needed to protect and nurture with the utmost care.

From that perspective, bestowing the imperial crest upon Ellen was a crucial and wise decision by the Emperor.

But why Reinhardt as well?

Bertus believed that Reinhardt also possessed a formidable talent.

In terms of speed, Reinhardt might even be superior to Ellen. Though there was a significant difference in their starting points, both could now use Magic Body Strengthening. Of course, their skills were not equal.

However, at present, Ellen had the extraordinary example of her older brother Ragan Artorius, and it was a fact that she received expectations beyond that. In reality, there were even more skilled individuals in the empire than Ellen and Reinhardt.

Even if one were to invest in potential, receiving the imperial crest without the background of being the hero's younger sister was a bit excessive.

"He is the master of Tiamata, they say."

"What?"

Tiamata.

At those words, Bertus furrowed his brow.

"You mean the Tiamata I know? The sacred relic of Tu'an?"

"Yes. Reinhardt is…"

His subordinate paused.

"The Champion of Tu'an."

Champion of Tu'an.

Reinhardt was the Champion of Tu'an.

Feeling a different kind of shock than before, Bertus stood there with his mouth agape.

"Since when?"

"I'm not sure. I just received this information…"

Tiamata's master.

Champion of Tu'an.

Apostle of the Goddes of Purity.

Pure.

And.

Crossdressing.

"No, seriously, why the hell did he crossdress?"

"…Pardon?"

At Bertus's outburst, his subordinate could not help but step back in surprise.

Purity and crossdressing.

Bertus was certain that Reinhardt was even more insane than he had initially thought. Rubbing his throbbing temples, Bertus let out a deep sigh.

"Anyway, Reinhardt is the Champion of Tu'an, right? We're not sure when this happened, though."

"Yes, Your Majesty. So, it's possible that he and Ellen Artorius received the Royal Crest as contenders against the Demon King… That's what we believe."

"It could be. It's a plausible situation…"

There was a scene Bertus wanted to erase from his mind by soaking his brain in cleaning solution and scrubbing it away.

He forcibly shoved the thought aside as it kept creeping up on him.

Reinhardt was definitely a pervert, but he was also undeniably the Champion of Tu'an.

He pushed aside his concerns about the irrelevant parts. He wanted to put them away forever, but that was easier said than done.

Anyway, Reinhardt was the Champion of Tu'an. That's why he and Ellen had received the Royal Crest.

Bertus knew that Ellen was the master of Lament.

However, he had not known that Reinhardt was the Champion of Tu'an until now.

"Last year, he and Ellen brought back something from Darkland, which was thought to be a relic of the Demon King, right?"

"Yes, if you mean the item that suddenly disappeared…"

Last summer, Reinhardt had brought back a powerful artifact believed to be a relic of the Demon King from Darkland.

But, when they tried to investigate it closely, it vanished after Dettomorian performed some kind of ritual.

"Isn't it a bit far-fetched to think that this 'relic of the Demon King' business is related to Reinhardt being the Champion of Tu'an?"

"Well… I don't know, Your Majesty."

The idea that a sacred relic could be corrupted was something that only someone who had seen it with their own eyes could believe.

If the item was connected to Reinhardt obtaining Tiamata, it would mean that quite some time had passed since he had become the Champion of Tu'an.

"So he's been keeping the fact that he's the Champion of Tu'an a secret all this time…"

Bertus could understand why.

Being the master of a sacred relic would naturally draw unnecessary attention. That's why Ellen hid the fact that she was the hero's sister and the master of Lament as well.

It seemed plausible that Reinhardt, who was close to Ellen, had managed to conceal the fact that he had become the master of Tiamata until now.

Ultimately, it was too vague to determine at this point whether Reinhardt had become the champion of Tuàn before or after entering the Temple. It could only be inferred that it was around the summer vacation period.

However.

The real point to consider lay elsewhere.

He had been unable to know that Reinhardt was the master of Tiamata until now. It was a secret that had been well hidden.

"How on earth did His Majesty come to know that Reinhardt is the champion of Tu'an…?"

Reinhardt wouldn't have confessed the fact to the Emperor himself.

It seemed that the Emperor had accurately pinpointed Reinhardt and Ellen and granted the royal crest.

How?

How did the Emperor know something that Reinhardt wouldn't have told and granted the royal crest?

"Hmm, and it's certainly a bit peculiar."

Bertus murmured, resting his chin in his hand.

"Tiamata is known to be an object that does not fall into the hands of unbelievers."

“…That's right."

Tiamata was a sacred relic that only acknowledged the knights or priests of Tu’an as its master. However, Reinhardt didn't particularly have any faith, nor did he have the temperament to have any.

"It seems more fitting for Olivia Lanze, who is close to Reinhardt, to be the master. If there's not much difference between a person who has given up their faith and a person without faith, then perhaps she would be better…”

Wouldn't Olivia Lanze, a believer of Tu’an and possessing powerful divine power to the extent of being called a saint, be more suitable as the champion of Tu’an?

Bertus thought that if he were Tu’an, he would have chosen Olivia instead of Reinhardt.

However, the thoughts of the gods were unknowable.

It wasn't even certain whether they were beings capable of thought.

In the end, only the result remained.

The Emperor wouldn't have granted the royal crest based on mere rumors, so Reinhardt must be the champion of Tuàn.

The power of purity.

The power opposed to corruption.

The power to stand against darkness.

Darkness.

The power of darkness.

Shadows.

It was so miserable, as if prepared for death, that it was considered unworthy of even being confronted.

The power to control shadows that had been gradually eroding.

His sibling.

Charlotte de Gradias.

Having let go of everything, then suddenly regaining vitality at some point.

Moments of Charlotte's life surfaced in Bertus's mind.

Numerous thoughts tangled in Bertus's head.

"…"

Bertus stared out the window with a stern expression.

"Come to think of it, that guy Reinhardt sometimes left the Temple…"

Soon, the Crown Prince showed a gloomy smile.

"The dates when my sibling's condition is estimated to have improved suddenly."

"The dates when Reinhardt didn't attend the Temple. The time of his return."

"My sibling's whereabouts."

"Bring everything compared and collated."

At Bertus's order, his subordinate nodded.

"Yes, Your Highness."

As the subordinate who received the order hurriedly left, someone knocked on Bertus's office door.

Knock knock

"What is it?"

"Your Highness, Lady Saviolin Turner requests an audience."

"Tsk, there's no time to rest. Let her in."

The position of the First Prince was too great to focus on just one matter.

If forgotten, the data sorted by his subordinates would give him inspiration or insight into something else.

Until then, he just needed to be occupied with other tasks.

Saviolin Turner soon entered the First Prince's office.

As always, her expression was stern and her demeanor composed. Her appearance, regardless of her actual age, resembled that of an enigmatic woman.

The head of Shanafel paid her respects to the First Prince.

"I am honored to meet you, Your Highness."

"Welcome, Lady Turner."

As Saviolin Turner looked at the First Prince, she spoke.

"I heard that there is a task for me."

"Yes, Lady Turner, it's an important matter."

Bertus, wearing a ring on his finger, smiled.

"A very important matter."

Saviolin Turner silently stared at Bertus's smile.

CHAPTER 362

There remained a task that I now had to consider as my last.

Well, rather than calling it the last, it would be more appropriate to say that it was a task that, in some sense, signified the beginning, with all preparations completed.

The Temple dormitory.

Nighttime.

"Yesterday, I finished making contact with Owen de Getmora."

Inside my dormitory room, I was listening to Sarkegaar's report.

"How did he react? Wasn't he surprised?"

"He seemed somewhat startled, but being a natural-born merchant, he quickly regained his composure."

It must have been disconcerting for someone who was promoting the Human Republic Revolution to suddenly be approached by forces from the demon world. However, it seemed that he had calmly begun to assess the situation.

"He said he would have to discuss it with his advisers first, but as you suggested, the circumstances seem to be favorable for a positive response."

As far as we knew, there was no difference between having a leash around their necks and being caught. If they didn't want to join hands, all we had to do was pass on information about the revolutionary forces to the empire.

"Right, from the empire's perspective, the immediate threat isn't us, but the revolutionary forces."

The existence of the demon world forces could serve as grounds for uniting humanity. However, the revolutionary forces represented internal divisions.

The demon world forces couldn't bring down the empire, but the revolutionary forces could.

Therefore, the ones the empire would truly want to eradicate with all their might were not us, but the revolutionary forces.

Sarkegaar looked at me cautiously.

"Of course, Owen had one condition during our meeting."

"A condition…? What is it?"

"He wants to see the Demon King's descendant with his own eyes."

"Hmm."

It wasn't entirely unexpected. If they were to join hands with us, they would be curious about how much power we had left and what we could do.

And they would want to verify the existence of the last Demon King, who was only rumored to exist. If I had the power of the ancestors of the Demon King's lineage, I would be very reliable.

But I didn't possess such practical power.

"Can't he tell by looking at an Archdemon?"

"That's what I said."

So, showing myself wouldn't make much of a difference.

"What do you plan to do? Of course, we will need to coordinate on the location and manner of the meeting. Also, you don't have to confront him personally. There could be traps or dangers of any kind."

We knew them, but they didn't know us.

Revealing ourselves and exposing our full strength in such a situation couldn't be considered a good choice.

However, we would prefer to form an alliance rather than be exploited.

We were already in the grasp of the Black Order.

"Going there personally would be risky. Let's avoid face-to-face meetings until we've built a certain level of trust. It's not like we have to see each other's faces to work together."

Restraint is necessary at times.

"Understood, Your Highness."

Sarkegaar looked at me as if his report was finished.

"I've decided to cooperate with the Order."

"I see."

Epinhauser never mentioned that he was a member of the Black Order. If that were the case, Sarkegaar would try to get me out of the Temple by any means necessary.

"The exact purpose of the Black Order is still unclear. But it seems they've agreed to join forces to fight against Cantus Magna. While our interests align, we can't quite trust each other, but we'll work together."

“…I think it's too dangerous."

Sarkegaar's judgment is correct.

And I am actually in an even more dangerous situation. If Sarkegaar knew that I had hidden Epinhauser's affiliation with the Black Order, he would be furious.

"I'm not sure if it's the right decision to put ourselves at risk like this for Akasha. It might not be the object we're looking for, after all."

"Perhaps."

What is Akasha?

I don't know.

But since I've decided to do something, I must.

The die was cast long ago, and now we're just moving our pieces.

If I wasn't going to move my pieces, I would have stayed in Eleris's shop, quietly waiting for the Gate incident to happen and leaving all other events and accidents untouched, killing time in that cramped second-floor corner.

"You know that I went to the Demon King's territory this time, right?"

"Yes, Your Highness. Was there something there?"

"It was a hideout, stocked with supplies that could last for a very long time."

At my words, Sarkegaar stares at me blankly.

"In the underground of the Demon King's territory… There's such a place?"

"Yes, it seems you didn't know."

"No, this is the first time I've heard of it."

"It appears to be a labyrinth that only opens to Archdemons."

"A mysterious labyrinth… The previous Demon King was well-versed in magic, so it's not that surprising, I suppose…"

In fact, even Airi vaguely knew there was a secret space like that in the Demon King's territory.

The Four Heavenly Kings must have known about the bunker, but they kept it a secret. Airi knew the location, but she didn't know it was a bunker.

If so, the ones who knew about the bunker were the Four Heavenly Kings, the Demon King, and myself.

The rest didn't know about the secret space in the Demon King's territory. Of course, someone else might know, but I can't be certain.

"It's a labyrinth. It seemed like no one but Archdemons could even enter."

"I see…"

"Anyway, there were plenty of magical books from the demon realm in there. We'll use them as bait to lure Cantus Magna."

The bait is more than enough.

So we prepare to catch the big fish named Cantus Magna, together with the Black Order.

"Pass this information on to Lucinil. Then Eleris will know too."

We share the information we've gathered and decide what steps to take moving forward.

"Yes, Your Highness."

Sarkegaar transforms into a sparrow and flies away.

I gently pressed my temples and took a few deep breaths.

Shouldn't I meet the revolutionary forces directly?

Is it right for me to obediently stay in the temple when the Black Order could harm me at any moment?

Would soul-absorbing magic be the solution to Charlotte's condition?

What if I make a mistake with Cantus Magna, causing even bigger problems?

When everything goes wrong…

If I tell them that I was actually trying to save everyone…

Who would believe me?

Two days had passed.

Nothing particularly significant had happened during that time. I was cautiously approaching contact with the revolutionary forces, and I hadn't received any opinions from Professor Epinhauser.

However.

It seemed that there were quite a few people who found my gloomy demeanor bothersome.

"Hey, come out."

Liana called me out as I stayed cooped up in my room, clutching my head.

She appeared in an unexpected way at an unexpected time.

"What is it?"

"Let's hang out with your big sis."

She got a taste of defeating Cliffman, and now she's doing this to me too?

“…Why do you think you're my big sister?"

"Kid, it's just a figure of speech."

She grabbed me by the collar and dragged me out of the room.

"Ouch!"

"Anyway, come out, you little brat."

This girl, who seemed to live without any worries and only focused on enjoying herself.

A rich girl who seemed like a rich girl but also didn't.

Liana de Grantz.

"Want a drink?"

"You and I aren't at the age to drink like it's a natural thing, you know?"

"But last time, you were screaming your head off and enjoying yourself, weren't you?"

Somehow.

In a situation like this, Liana's carefree behavior was comforting.

It was still afternoon.

As Liana dragged me along, she spoke.

"Anyway, spare some time."

"What for?"

"Let's have a chat."

Liana looked at me and grinned.

"I don't know why you're so gloomy, but there are more than a few people who get tired of it, you know?"

-Thump thump!

Liana patted my shoulder.

"You won't die from lightening up."

Not everything that goes wrong is because of a bad attitude.

So, it's okay to lighten up.

"You're right."

As I chuckled weakly, Liana clicked her tongue.

"A pig about to be slaughtered tomorrow wouldn't have an expression like that, would it?"

"Are your words gradually getting harsher?"

"Yeah, come on out like this. It's more familiar this way."

As I seemed about to lose my temper, Liana laughed and patted my back.

Liana de Grantz…

She always seemed distant yet close.

A strange girl.

She said to spare some time.

Liana took me outside the temple.

"Where are we going?"

"Just follow me."

She even dragged me onto a magic train.

Come to think of it, there weren't many times when it was just the two of us.

It was during the deserted island group mission when I first spoke with Liana. After that, we didn't seem particularly close, but after the summer vacation, we began to treat each other casually, as if we had become friends.

We hadn't shared many experiences, but somehow we became close enough that we didn't feel any discomfort around each other—a peculiar kind of relationship.

We could call each other friends without hesitation.

That's what I think, at least.

On the magic train with a limited number of passengers, I absentmindedly gaze out the window, gripping the handrail.

The scenery resembles Seoul, but it's distinctly different as it whizzes by.

The process of taking the train is the same, but the landscapes of this world don't resemble those in my head from Seoul.

Inside the swaying train carriage.

"What's the matter?"

Liana de Grantz asks quietly.

I could feel her concern for me in her simple question.

There's a lot going on, but I can't talk about it.

"Nothing's wrong."

"Well, people can feel that way sometimes."

Though she didn't seem entirely convinced, she didn't pry further. Liana fell silent for a moment, searching for a new topic before speaking up again.

"The new students will be joining us soon."

“…Yeah."

I had been preoccupied with my own issues and hadn't given any thought to that matter.

We're now second-year students, and soon, new students will be entering the Royal Class.

Some of these new students will have roles in the original work, and since my actions shouldn't have affected that part, they will be admitted to the Royal Class as usual. They'll mostly be involved with Ludwig, though.

Of course, they'll be divided into first-year A and B classes, maintaining the same power dynamics among the seniors.

Juniors.

I've drifted away from the temple while thinking about such things.

"I just hope we don't have juniors like you."

“…What's wrong with me?"

"Would you like it if we had a junior who started cursing at their seniors trying to maintain discipline?"

"Oh."

That thought makes my head spin.

Having a junior like me?

That would be the worst.

Liana looks at me and asks.

"What would you do if Harriet gathered the juniors and was telling them various things, and a junior as small as a mouse started lecturing her and she ended up crying?"

Well.

That.

Uh…

"…”

"You wouldn't let that go, right? Like that senior who came to discipline you last time and left with a swagger?"

I couldn't deny it!

I had cursed at Redina, who came to discipline the juniors, and she had brought second-year Ard with her, swearing to teach me a lesson. I had been beaten badly by Ard but managed to avoid the crisis with a last-minute high kick.

And now that I'm a second-year student.

Our class probably won't have to deal with disciplining the juniors.

But if we did, and a junior started mouthing off to one of our classmates.

And if Harriet, surprised by the incident, tearfully reported it to me.

'If my junior ever said that to me… '

Even if they did say such a thing.

I have no confidence that I wouldn't beat them senseless.

Ard de Gritis…

You…

You deserved it…

Only after a year had passed did I come to understand the feelings of my senior who had defeated me.

I'm sure I would be no less severe, if not more so…

Who do you think you are, dealing with our thickheaded friend? Even though she may appear this way, she's a princess.

When it was my turn to endure it, I found it unbearable and annoying, but if the situation were reversed, I couldn't guarantee that I wouldn't do the same!

Seeing my expression, as if she could read my thoughts, Liana burst into laughter.

"But when you think about it, it's amazing. Last year, when you did that crazy thing, I really thought you were an unbelievable lunatic… How did it come to this?"

We had no reason to become close, but after various events, we ended up becoming friends. Liana must have never expected that she'd end up going on walks outside with someone like me.

Liana gazed out the window with a faint smile.

"Anyway, it was fun."

"…"

"I hope this year is the same."

Just like Liana said, last year was filled with fun events, and I hoped that this year would be full of enjoyable moments as well.

"…I hope so too."

I wish the same.

We took a magical train, and soon I found out where Liana was taking me.

The mansion-dense area in the northern part of the Imperial City.

In front of an incredibly large mansion, Liana stopped.

"Of course, this isn't your house, is it?"

"You know it well."

What does my apparent gloominess have to do with your invitation to your home?

Liana chuckled.

"Soon, I'll have to ask for permission."

"Permission? Permission for what?"

"Marriage."

"Wha- No, what?"

"What is it? Don't you like it?"

What on earth is she talking about?

Has she been looking at me that way all this time?

"Um, no… I don't understand what you're saying. And, sorry, but…"

"…You really think I'm serious? It's a joke."

Liana clicked her tongue as if she couldn't believe it. Then, a blue spark jumped from her hair.

-Zap!

"Also, you're getting really worked up, and it's annoying."

"What do you want me to do? Don't play jokes like that!"

"Quiet."

As if her pride had been hurt by my reaction to her joke, Liana crossed her arms, and soon the mansion doors were opened by the servants.

"Welcome back, Miss."

"Yes."

"Everyone is waiting for you in the guesthouse."

Waiting?

Who on earth is waiting?

"Come on."

Liana grabbed my arm and led the way through the vast mansion.

"You should be grateful, you know."

Liana muttered something incomprehensible as she dragged me along.

CHAPTER 363

At the Grantz Duke's mansion.

It was not the main building, but as soon as I entered the annex, I couldn't help but be surprised.

First of all, the dining room of the annex was filled with delicious smells.

Naturally, the table was laden with countless dishes.

However, the important thing was not the food.

"You're here."

Ellen.

"…"

Harriet.

"Ah, you're here…"

Adelia.

"Uh, um… So, you've come? Reinhardt."

Cliffman was there as well.

"What is all this…?"

Liana poked my side with her elbow, as I couldn't understand the situation.

"What do you think? We saw you looking down and thought we'd do something to cheer you up, so we decided to have a party."

The food looked delicious.

Judging by the fact that everyone was wearing aprons, it seemed like they had prepared the dishes themselves.

I looked upset, but I didn't tell them why.

So they tried to comfort me somehow, but they didn't know what to do, so they planned a surprise party.

This wouldn't solve any problems or ease my psychological anxiety about the issues I faced.

The more I saw them worrying about me, the more fearful I became of the future.

This was useless.

The better the present, the more I feared the future.

In fact, I didn't need this at all.

Because one day, I would long for this moment.

"Uh… Are you crying?"

Liana's trembling voice broke the silence, echoing throughout the dining room.

It sounded genuinely flustered, and the others stared at me with their mouths agape.

"What the hell are you talking about? What would make me cry?"

"Ah, no… You're really crying?"

Liana made a fuss, having misread the situation.

I was no child.

I was way past the age of shedding tears over something like this.

"I'm not crying!"

Why would I cry?

Just because they threw a surprise party for me?

How old do you think I am?

“…Here."

Ellen approached me and offered a tissue.

No, I wasn't crying, so why would I need this?

"I'm not crying, okay?"

I didn't cry.

I had no idea if something had come out of my eyes without my knowing.

It was something I didn't know.

"Alright, since you're not crying, here."

In the end,

I accepted the tissue Ellen offered.

"Damn…”

Somehow,

I felt defeated.

And then,

There was such a person.

Someone who cries without knowing why when others cry.

"Sniff…”

"Wait… Why are you crying?"

"Wah… I don't, don't know…”

Harriet suddenly started crying as well, and Liana was left dumbfounded for the second time.

"Here."

"Uh, uhm… Sniff…”

Ellen handed a tissue to Harriet as well.

I didn't cry, but Harriet did. I firmly believe that.

Of course, the children's thoughts might differ, but it's none of my business.

So, in the end, although it was a surprise party, a lavish feast was spread out before us. Naturally, it would be rude not to eat.

The atmosphere was far from that of a social gathering where musicians played and people danced.

It seemed clear that Liana disliked such events. It was hard to imagine Liana dressed up and dancing at a social party.

With her legs crossed, she seemed like she would give a cold stare to any man who approached her, as if to say "Get lost if you have no business here."

Of course, I wouldn't know for sure.

There was plenty of food prepared.

I knew from before that Ellen could cook well, but it was surprising to find out that Harriet, Adelia, and even Clifman had cooked as well.

“…Were you dragged into this?"

“…They said they needed more hands."

It seemed Liana had roped Clifman into it.

Had he become Liana's personal servant?

If he enjoyed it as a reward, that would be one thing, but if he was really forced into it against his will, wouldn't that be considered bullying?

No.

At this point, calling it bullying seems a bit absurd.

What I was curious about was who made what.

Om nom nom

I couldn't tell what Ellen had made since she was devouring everything in front of her.

Eek!

It was quite clear what Harriet had made. She watched me carefully as I reached for the food, her eyes filled with anticipation.

But it was quite surprising.

The cream pasta in front of me.

Judging by her watchful gaze, it seemed clear that Harriet had made it.

But honestly.

A character like her should definitely be terrible at cooking, right?

It looked fine, but I thought it might have sugar instead of salt or something like that.

In the end, not wanting to disappoint her, I closed my eyes and took a bite.

"How is it? How is it?"

Harriet eagerly asked me as soon as I had taken a bite.

What's going on?

Why is it just delicious?

It wasn't an extraordinary delicacy, but thinking that Harriet had made it, it felt even tastier due to the novelty.

“…Why is it good?"

At my words, Harriet furrowed her brow.

"What do you mean? If it's delicious, it's delicious. What's with the 'why is it good' question?"

"No, why do you know how to cook?"

"I just followed the recipe in the cookbook, you know?"

Ah.

So, if you strictly follow the recipe, it can't be tasteless, right?

She had approached cooking like a top student. In fact, considering that, it seemed almost impossible for Harriet to be bad at cooking.

And yet, for a first attempt, this level of skill was quite impressive. Wasn't this enough to say she had an incredible talent for cooking?

The dishes varied, but a pattern emerged.

The delicious ones were all made by Ellen.

The ones that were just fine were mostly made by Harriet.

"…”

"…”

There was indeed some horribly tasteless food.

"It's my first time… because it's my first time…”

"No, if it's your first time, it's only natural to be like this. Don't think you couldn't do it."

Adelia had taken the role of the cook. Well, she could hardly be called a cook. It was strange that Harriet, who was doing it for the first time, was good at it.

Cliffman seemed to have been in charge of various chores, starting with preparing the ingredients.

In the end, the bountiful meal came to a close.

"Anyway, thank you all."

I sincerely expressed my gratitude for the fact that they all went out of their way to do this, just to prevent me from being depressed.

The party was not over. Since we were visiting the Grantz Ducal House, we agreed to stay overnight in one of the many empty rooms.

I had plenty of time, as I wasn't particularly busy.

Even though it wasn't the main house, the annex was still the size of an average mansion.

Liana's intentions were obvious.

She was clearly planning to have a drink with the kids tonight. It wasn't the right time now, since it was daytime and there were servants around, but she was definitely waiting for the right moment.

Taking us to the annex was to avoid the gazes of the servants and family in the main house.

Of course, such a drinking session wouldn't happen until the evening.

"Still, I want to go somewhere fun during the winter break."

Liana lay on Cliffman's lap, trimming her nails and mumbling.

Cliffman was frozen, unable to do anything.

At a glance, it should have looked sweet and exciting.

But Liana seemed to think of him only as a pillow.

"Hey, you."

"Uh, uh, uh…"

With his face flushed, Cliffman stuttered when Liana looked up at him and called.

"Is there anywhere you want to go?"

"Me, me? Me?!"

"Well, I asked you, didn't I? Did I ask someone else?"

"Th-that, that's…"

"…Why are you so flustered?"

Liana laughed softly, looking up at Cliffman.

"Oh, did you think I meant just the two of us?"

"No, no?! No. No, no. Not. Not. That?"

"You're naughty. Why, do you want to go out just with me? Huh?"

"No, no! No way! I said no!"

"What? No? You don't want to right now?"

"Ah, no, not… not…"

"Do you want to? Go out just the two of us?"

"Pl-please… It's all my fault…”

With his face drained of color, Cliffman surrendered, and Liana laughed heartily. Harriet watched Liana with a dumbfounded expression. Harriet patted my shoulder and whispered.

"Sometimes, Liana can be… you know…”

"Malicious."

At my words, Harriet's eyes widened.

She seemed to want to disagree, but ultimately, she couldn't say anything, which made it seem like she strongly agreed.

Adelia couldn't bear to look at the scene, her face turning red, and she couldn't bring herself to watch any longer.

Om nom nom

Ellen was, for better or worse, preoccupied with macarons.

Despite her prank on Cliffman, it seemed that Liana genuinely wanted to go somewhere before the winter break ended.

Thus, a sudden discussion about where to go for the winter vacation took place.

What was amusing during the conversation was that Cliffman, who had a human seasickness, had the most reactions. Although most of them were stammering, he spoke the second most after Liana.

During the conversation, I wasn't sure if I could join them, so I stepped outside. Under the pretext of going for a walk.

Apparently, it was fine to roam freely since our visit had already been reported to Duke Grantz.

But, was I being too much?

When visiting a friend's house, isn't it polite to greet their parents at least?

Playing and having fun without saying a word, was it proof that I hadn't completely escaped from Confucian thought?

Although I felt guilty, I didn't step forward to greet Duke Grantz. That would be a ridiculous act.

I wandered around the mansion garden near the annex.

There were no flowers due to winter, and it was a well-maintained garden with neatly arranged shrubs.

The mere fact that they could have a mansion of this size on the main street made me feel once again how powerful and wealthy the Grantz family was.

And considering how they were supporting a daughter like Liana, who spent money like water, it was evident.

Come to think of it, almost all of our classmates with powerful backgrounds were in Class A.

Bertus de Gardias.

Liana de Grantz.

Harriet de Saint-Owan.

Heinrich von Schwarz.

Of course, Erich was a noble too, but not as powerful as them.

On the other hand, apart from Charlotte, Anna de Gerna was the only noble in Class B. Although she was more like a magician family, like Harriet.

Anyway.

After wandering here and there, I ended up at the Grantz family mansion.

If I had asked Liana to show me her house, she would have brought me there without hesitation, so it wasn't that difficult to reach.

As I walked through the winter garden,

I never expected to meet someone in a place like this. He was entering the mansion through the main gate, escorted by a servant.

"Um."

“…Ah."

"Reinhardt, I didn't expect to see you here."

The middle-aged man, slightly lifting his hat in greeting.

"Ah… It's been a while."

In this situation, at this place.

Why are you here?

I got goosebumps.

The Merchant Guild Master.

It was Owen de Getmora.

CHAPTER 364

After briefly greeting me, Owen de Gatmora said he had business to attend to and headed toward the main building of the mansion.

I stood there, quietly watching his retreating figure.

Being a merchant guild master wouldn't be a problem no matter where he was. Naturally, he would come and go for profitable ventures, and the Grantz Ducal House was undoubtedly a wealthy place.

That would have been the case not too long ago.

However, I now know that he is involved with the revolutionary forces.

Owen de Gatmora is a man who can go anywhere.

Therefore, he could easily enter the Grantz Ducal House for business or any other reason.

It's an overreach to think that the Duke of Grantz might be involved in the revolutionary forces, as he has no reason to be interested in the revolution. But it's not like there hasn't been a history of privileged nobles pouring everything into such matters.

Since I don't know what kind of person the Duke of Grantz is, I cannot know what he thinks or what kind of disposition he has.

My head felt like it was going to explode.

What if the Duke of Grantz is a core figure in the revolutionary forces?

So what if he is?

Does it matter either way, considering I will eventually cooperate with them from the position of a demon prince?

No.

After the Gate incident is resolved…

If the anti-empire alliance survives, whose side should I take?

Thinking about the aftermath before the main event seems absurd.

If I choose to maintain the empire and sabotage the anti-empire alliance, the result will be a massacre.

If I choose to maintain the alliance and incite rebellion against the empire, it will be a war.

-Suddenly!

I heard the sound of a window opening from behind the annex.

“Hey! Are you coming in or not?”

Liana, shooting sparks of electricity as if to threaten me, shouted at me.

It can't be.

The Duke of Grantz couldn't be involved.

There's no rationale.

Why would the Duke of Grantz, born with everything and sure to live with everything, risk it all on a reckless challenge?

But what if he isn't?

Whether the Gate incident is resolved or not, the moment I formed the anti-empire alliance, countless people will die depending on my choice. That fact won't change.

Choosing the empire or the anti-empire alliance.

I just realized another truth: that many will die due to my decision.

“Stop standing there and hurry up!”

-Zap! Zap!

"Alright, alright."

Liana de Grantz, who knows nothing of the world and lives by doing whatever she pleases.

It would be nice if she could live her whole life without knowing such things.

Liana doesn't know about the dilemma I'm facing.

As winter break approached, various discussions arose about where to go for some fun, but everyone seemed lukewarm about the idea.

"I'm planning to train. I've rested too much while visiting my hometown this time."

Although Ellen hadn't participated in the tournament, her desire to become stronger hadn't lessened but had grown even stronger than before. Eventually, she would have to face the Demon King, and she might have to stand at the forefront of that battle, so she believed it was essential to make good use of her time.

Moreover, for now, albeit uncertain for how long, the strongest swordsman on the continent, Saviolin Turner, resided in the dormitory.

Ludwig kept pestering Turner and learning various things, but Ellen hadn't had the chance to train with Saviolin Turner due to preparing for Miss Temple last time and visiting her hometown this time.

Thus, it was inevitable that she felt restless.

"Um… I think my magic research is finally starting to make progress…”

Adelia hesitated but seemed reluctant to take a break for a week or so, as the completion of the power cartridge was gradually coming into view.

Harriet was in the same boat, with her interdimensional magic research and a

schedule so tight that even splitting her time would hardly suffice.

"Thanks for today, but I also have plans."

Although unable to explain, in the end, everyone was busy, and personal training like Ellen's could serve as an excuse.

Eventually.

Regarding the trip, everyone but Cliffman found it difficult to go.

"What's going on? Why is everyone… living so diligently…?"

Liana murmured blankly, her eyes unfocused.

I chuckled at Liana's expression.

“…You seem to have forgotten, but isn't it appropriate for Royal Class students receiving full support from the Empire to live like this?"

"Wow… Hearing that from you makes me feel even more disgusted…?"

Liana continued to murmur blankly.

Come to think of it, the kids here were all exceptional even among the top students.

It would be strange if they didn't live like this!

Without any particular effort, your psychic output may skyrocket, so it's fine for you to have fun, but everyone else must put in the effort!

"…”

Liana looked at Cliffman weakly.

And you?

That was the vibe she gave off.

Cliffman was indeed born with exceptional talent, but he too needed to train. He

hadn't yet awakened his Magic Body Strengthening.

However, Liana might be utterly disheartened if she got rejected this time as well.

"Th-that's… I, I am… I am…”

But if Cliffman said it was fine, it would really just end up with the two of them going on a trip, so his face turned red, and he stuttered.

Seeing Cliffman like this, Liana finally dropped her head.

"Never mind… Everyone just die… Everyone live diligently… Let's see how well you live…”

Liana muttered, seemingly devoid of spirit.

Her friends were living so diligently that it had broken Liana's spirit.

As evening approached at the Grantz Ducal House, Liana's mental state, which had been shattered earlier, slowly began to recover.

Heh heh.

The hour of indulging in a drink was fast approaching.

At this age, is it really alright to enjoy alcohol this much? Whether the Duke of Grantz was involved in the revolutionary forces or not, wasn't his management of his children a failure from the start?

"Ah, Miss… there are guests here…”

"It's fine. Hurry up and leave. Rest, go and rest. It's alright."

That couldn't possibly be alright, could it? Judging by how she was pushing the servants away and telling them to rest, they seemed to know that something was about to happen here.

With so much money and no worries about the future, there truly is no one like her.

"Is… is it really okay to do this?"

"I said…"

Both Harriet and Adelia looked uneasy, unable to settle down, not knowing what Liana was thinking.

Nearly everyone in the Edina mansion was a servant.

But here, in the main house where the Duke of Grantz resided, it would be nothing short of rude to not greet him and to just have a drinking party among the children.

It's not a problem with me being steeped in Confucian thought. This really is strange! The fact that everyone, except Ellen, looked as if they shouldn't be doing this was proof.

And so, one by one, as Liana pushed the servants away, the mansion was now completely empty according to her plan.

"Heh heh, shall we begin now?"

I cannot forgive you diligent ones.

At that moment, as Liana was about to open the display case with such an expression.

Bang

"Liana! Why aren't you introducing your friends?"

"Ah, Dad?!"

A man with a pleasant demeanor opened the door to the mansion and shouted cheerfully.

Liana, with a clearly flustered expression, finally raised her fists in anger and yelled.

"Argh! I told you not to come to the mansion when I'm playing with my friends!"

Huh.

What is this familiar feeling?

"I should at least greet your friends when you brought them along! Do you know how long I've been waiting?"

"Ah, you've already met these two before! Why do you want to see them again!"

That's right.

During the Miss and Mister Temple contest, Liana had taken Cliffman and Ellen to the Grantz Duke's house.

Ellen and Cliffman, who seemed to have become acquainted with the Duke back then, bowed their heads when they saw him.

"Hello."

"It's an honor to see you, Your Grace."

"That's right, Ellen. Still as cute as ever. Cliffman, it looks like you've gained some more muscle. But there are some new faces, aren't there?"

As Harriet, Adelia, and I were about to stand up and say something, Liana forcefully pushed the Duke's chest.

"This is Reinhardt, this is Adelia, and this is Harriet. There, satisfied? Now go! Leave, quickly!"

"Ouch, my dear daughter is pushing me away. Did I say I was going to scold you? Let's just chat, alright? Let's chat, you little rascal."

"Ah, I don't care. Just leave!"

What could it be?

The feeling with Harriet and the unapproachable Archduke was different.

Still, the unapproachable Archduke at least tried to appear stern. The Duke of Grantz seemed a bit mischievous, didn't he?

"Oh dear, you must have a hard time dealing with your daughter's temper, huh, guys?"

"Ah, stop spouting nonsense and just leave!"

It seemed that rather than being a doting father, Duke Grantz enjoyed watching his daughter struggle.

Watching Liana's irritated face while chuckling to himself was more than enough to confirm this.

"Get out! Out! Out! Out! Out! Out!"

"Good grief, fine then."

In the end, Duke Grantz was pushed out of the annex by his daughter.

-Bang! Clank! Clank!

"Ugh, seriously."

After forcefully closing the door, Liana locked it.

"I told him not to come, what's his deal?"

Liana grumbled, showing off her spoiled nature without holding back.

-Click!

The sound of the lock opening accompanied the annex door swinging open again.

"Did our daughter not know about this?"

In his hand, a large keyring jingled.

Oh, no.

This father-daughter relationship is complicated.

"Does my daughter think that locking a door will keep her father out of his own

house?"

Duke Grantz, jingling the large keyring in his hand, reentered the annex with a sly laugh.

"Ah, seriously!"

-Sizzle!

As if genuinely furious, sparks began to flicker from Liana's hair.

"Oh dear, I was only joking, but it seems like you want to roast your father. What's the use of raising a daughter? Sigh."

"Get out!"

"Fine! I'm going! Go!"

-Thump!

Duke Grantz, fearing Liana might actually strike him with lightning, truly left the annex this time.

“Stop bickering, you guys!”

Duke Grantz continued to provoke them from beyond the door.

After the storm had passed,

"This is why I didn't introduce him!"

Liana stomped her foot, grumbling.

Though he had only appeared for a few minutes, we were all overwhelmed by Duke Grantz's imposing presence.

"What can I say… He's quite an extraordinary person…”

Harriet murmured blankly, her mouth agape, while Ellen, who had already seen this commotion several times before, casually sipped her tea and commented,

"He's a good person."

This was the first time Ellen had ever spoken about someone in this manner, leaving everyone baffled. Liana's eyes narrowed in response.

"What? Good? What's good about him?"

"Hmm. Based on my standards, you're definitely a spoiled brat."

I crossed my arms and looked at Liana.

Seriously!

Not to the heavens, but to her parents, seriously!

"Do you want to die?"

-Sizzle!

"No, it's obvious to anyone that you're a spoiled brat."

Everyone subtly nodded their heads in agreement with my composed conclusion.

"That's a bit… harsh, I think…"

Adelia's reaction.

"Looking at it this way… I think I might have been too harsh on my dad…"

Harriet began to reflect on her actions.

"Well, that's… true…"

Even Cliffman chimed in.

Ellen and Cliffman had seen this chaos more times and had witnessed Liana's antics more than the rest of us.

"Do you really want to die?"

"Are you really going to die?"

"Ah, no… well, it's not wrong, is it?"

Cliffman, surprisingly, knew what to say.

"Really… does everyone think that way…?"

A brat's trait: They don't listen to their parents, but they listen to their friends.

Even Cliffman, who would agree that the sky is yellow if Liana said so, was persuaded this time. Liana was dumbfounded.

"Am I… am I really a brat…?"

Liana ended up showing a typical brat's reaction, not listening to her father but finding enlightenment in her friends' words.

In any case, Duke Grantz, though not aware of Liana's thoughts, managed to dispel the last of our anxiety.

He clearly said, "Drink in moderation."

To drink in moderation meant that he was ultimately allowing us to drink.

Since it was said with the intention of letting us have a good time without worrying about him, Duke Grantz was not being malicious, even though he liked to see his daughter in trouble.

Liana and I had whiskey, while the rest drank sweet wine.

As we chatted, there wasn't anything too remarkable. The main topic was about the juniors who would join us next year.

"It would be nice if there were no kids like you."

Harriet said the exact same thing Liana had said earlier today.

"How common do you think someone like me is? It's a talent, you know."

"Wow… You're actually aware of your exceptional nature in that regard?"

"I'm surprisingly good at understanding the situation."

"Isn't it something you should fix instead of acknowledging it?"

"Isn't it about time you realize I'm not that bad of a person? You blockhead?"

"Talking to you always makes me mad… And stop calling me a blockhead!"

"You're used to it by now, right? You'd feel left out if I didn't call you a blockhead, right?"

"Argh! I don't feel left out! I don't!"

"I get it, Harriet."

“…Huh?"

"You feel a bit awkward now, huh? It's weird that I called you by your name, isn't it? Blockhead sounds better, doesn't it?"

"Aaaaaaaah! Stop it! You're really mean! Why do you treat me like this?!"

I succeeded in blowing Harriet's top, which hadn't happened in a long time, and felt a great satisfaction.

"Ah, I'm getting hot… Dizzy… It's because of that jerk…”

"Lie down for a bit."

"Ugh…”

Harriet groaned, then slumped down on the sofa, seemingly overwhelmed by the alcohol.

Harriet eventually fell asleep without realizing it.

Adelia, who was intoxicated and staggering, clung to Harriet like a pillow and fell asleep as well.

"I'm sleepy."

Ellen, who appeared not to be drunk at all, gulped down her wine and laid her head on Liana's lap.

She would probably fall asleep soon.

The only ones who were fully conscious were Liana, Cliffman, and myself.

Surprisingly, Cliffman didn't get very drunk.

I thought his alcohol tolerance was strong, but it seemed he hadn't been drinking at all.

Perhaps he was afraid of what he might do if he got drunk.

"Ah, what did I do so wrong…"

Liana seemed to have seriously pondered whether she was a brat or not, and concluded that she had done nothing wrong. She didn't seem too drunk, but she was tipsy enough.

I didn't drink much either. My reason wasn't the same as Cliffman's.

"Hey."

"I'm not a brat."

"No, what did I say?"

As soon as I called out, she reflexively blurted out those words, as if expecting a slap.

Usually, when you're unsure whether something is right or wrong, it's right, and Liana was indeed a brat.

Of course, that's not what I intended to discuss.

Owen de Getmora is a member of the revolutionary forces.

Because he came here, it is impertinent to suspect that Duke Grantz might be a part of the revolutionary forces.

However, there's a possibility.

Just a possibility.

But there's a very important question to ask in order to confirm that.

"Did your father also… attend the Temple?"

"The temple? Of course!"

My heart raced wildly.

Liana said that, taking a sip of her whiskey.

"Did he graduate from the Orbis Class?"

Damn it.

Blast.

CHAPTER 365

Not everyone from the Orbis class was involved in the revolutionary forces. However, graduating at the top of the Orbis class was quite a feat.

There was no reason for Duke Grantz to join the revolutionary forces.

Strictly speaking, regardless of one's origins, nobility, or wealth, there was no reason for anyone to join the revolutionary forces.

What could possibly warrant risking one's life for such a cause?

In reality, even those who would benefit from the revolution would be better off boarding the ship of the new world after the revolution had occurred, rather than risking their lives to be part of it.

If Duke Grantz was a member of the revolutionary forces, he would undoubtedly be a key figure.

“They say it whenever they scold me for graduating top of the class, but honestly I don’t believe it.”

He even graduated at the top of his class.

How wonderful ink was for pursuing one's dreams. Liana pointed to her head as she gulped whiskey, not knowing what I was thinking.

"No matter how much I think about it, my head isn't that good, you know? Who do you think I got this head from?"

She said her father's head must be bad because her own head was bad. It was a dizzying statement, but that wasn't what was important to me right now.

If Duke Grantz was part of the revolutionary forces, should I consider him my ally since I was going to join forces with them anyway?

Whether Duke Grantz was a part of the revolutionary forces or not, my only interest

was in delaying the revolution until after the Gate incident.

The Anti-Imperial Alliance was just an excuse, and there was no real intention to form it and raise a flag against the Empire.

The revolutionary forces, the independence of the Five Great Holy Religions, they all vanished in the whirlwind of the Gate incident. Humanity suffered enormous losses beyond the Empire, and there was no time left to dream of other things.

Rebuilding the world with all one's might was the endpoint after the Gate incident.

Before the great crisis of humanity, all trivial interests had disappeared.

But what would happen if that great crisis disappeared?

Would it be better if the Gate incident occurred…? Now, it might be better not to know.

In the end, I hadn't yet touched the essence of the Gate incident.

That's why I knew that all these thoughts and worries were ultimately empty.

—---

We cleaned up early since the children had fallen asleep. After tucking the sleeping children into their rooms, Liana and Cliffman went to their own rooms to sleep.

I couldn't sleep.

The surprise party that was suddenly planned to comfort me.

I was honestly moved by it, but since coming here, I had been burdened with irrelevant concerns.

There was nothing certain.

As I gazed out the window at the night-shrouded garden, I saw someone wandering through the garden.

A man with a pleasant countenance.

Duke Grantz.

Not knowing what to do, I opened the door of the annex.

The door to the annex opened, and he, who had been walking in the garden, watched me for a moment before bursting into a sly chuckle.

"Ah, it seems there's someone else who can't sleep tonight besides me."

Somehow, his laughter looked sad.

"Your name is Reinhardt, right?"

"Yes, that's correct."

"I've heard quite a bit about you."

Being a troublesome individual, Duke Grantz seemed to have heard various stories about me.

"When I ask my daughter to talk about the Temple, she gets annoyed, but she's told me more about you than anything else."

"Ah, yes…"

Duke Grantz chuckled as he patted my shoulder.

The habit of patting people while talking – had Liana inherited that from her father?

Liana had told the Duke quite a bit about me, describing me as a strange guy at the Temple since the beginning of the semester. Of course, Liana didn't seem to enjoy conversing with her father that much, so Duke Grantz hadn't heard my story to the point of having it drilled into his ears.

Mainly.

Focusing on incidents and accidents.

So.

I couldn't help but break into a cold sweat.

Duke Grantz.

Orbis Class graduate.

Possible revolutionary.

He might hold a personal grudge against me for being the catalyst of the Orbis Class closure.

"When I heard you fought with a senior from the Orbis Class, I thought you must be quite a big shot, even though I didn't know you."

Even if that weren't the case, the person responsible for the closure of his alma mater was right next to him.

However, all I could feel from Duke Grantz's sly smile was admiration for his bold daughter's friend.

Did he not care about the Orbis Class, or was he simply hiding his emotions?

"It must have been quite surprising for you, what happened after that, Reinhardt."

Instead, he spoke directly about the incident.

"Yes… I never expected it to turn out like this…"

In reality, I never anticipated that the conflict would escalate beyond the closure of the Orbis Class and accelerate the revolutionary movement.

"What was meant to happen, happened."

Duke Grantz said, looking up at the winter night sky.

His attitude seemed to suggest that he had known about the corruption of the Orbis Class long before.

Judging by his words, was he unrelated to the revolutionaries?

However, on a sleepless winter night.

I didn't know the reason why he couldn't sleep, but it was clear that I was not mistaken in sensing deep regret and some remorse in his expression.

As we walked and talked, I suddenly looked towards the mansion and couldn't help but feel a bit creeped out.

Someone was watching Duke Grantz and me.

A grown woman, with her arms crossed and frowning as if displeased, stared at me.

As our eyes met, she furrowed her brow even more and closed the curtain with a snap.

Both Duke Grantz and I saw her.

"Ah, um… My wife is a bit sensitive."

The Duchess?

As it turned out, since Liana had not introduced the Duke, it was only natural that she had not introduced the Duchess either.

Somehow, Duke Grantz seemed apologetic as he spoke.

What was bothering him?

Or was it that the Duke of Grantz stayed up late?

But there was something more to the nervous-looking Duchess's expression than mere irritation.

Disgust and contempt.

That was what it seemed like.

"Ahem, I think I should go inside now. It's cold, and a long nighttime walk isn't good

for you either."

"Oh, yes. I understand."

Duke Grantz seemed to be sparing his words.

The next day.

In the dining room of the annex, they had a simple breakfast served by the servants.

Of course, even though it was called a simple meal, it was still a breakfast fit for the Grantz household, able to accommodate Ellen's tremendous appetite.

The menu was simple, but the portions were not.

No one seemed to have a hangover from drinking too much.

However, Harriet was not present at breakfast.

"Where's Harriet?"

"Maybe she's still sleeping?"

In response to my question, Liana shrugged her shoulders. She didn't seem to drink that much last night; was she tired?

However, Harriet was not asleep.

After finishing breakfast and having tea, Harriet entered through the front door of the annex.

"Oh? Everyone's already up."

"Weren't you sleeping?"

Harriet shook her head at my question.

"No? I woke up the earliest."

"Then where did you go without having breakfast?"

Harriet scratched her cheek as if my question was slightly embarrassing.

"Well… The Duchess invited me to have breakfast with her…"

At this, Liana sighed deeply, pressing her forehead.

"I knew it…"

What was she talking about? Liana looked annoyed as she narrowed her eyes and spoke to Harriet.

"Harriet, don't pay any attention to whatever nonsense my mother told you."

The atmosphere was entirely different when talking about Duke Grantz.

Although she found her father annoying, there was no sign of genuine dislike.

However, when talking about her mother, Liana spoke with a sense of genuine disgust and contempt.

"Oh? But… she did say some nice things too…"

Harriet couldn't simply agree, so she awkwardly said as much.

"No way."

Liana dismissed the possibility, leaving Harriet feeling uncomfortable.

Harriet joined them at the table and drank her tea.

Duke Grantz.

The Duchess of Grantz.

The expressions directed at me last night, or at Duke Grantz.

The gaze filled with contempt.

Inviting Harriet to breakfast.

Only Harriet was invited.

The daughter of Count Saint-Owan.

Harriet de Saint-Owan.

The conclusion was that the Duchess of Grantz was extremely sensitive to social status.

Liana's words seemed to trouble Harriet greatly, yet she couldn't outright deny them. The conclusion was easily drawn from her expression.

It was clear that she had heard something she couldn't agree with.

After breakfast, we returned to the dormitory together.

On our way back, Duke Grantz bid us farewell.

"Have a safe journey, and be careful not to catch a cold in the winter."

Liana seemed ready to snap at him for even bothering to come out, but remembering the conversation we had yesterday, she frowned but didn't say anything to the Duke.

Rotten kid.

An additional attribute had been added to Liana de Grantz.

Duke Grantz greeted each of us in turn.

"Cliffman, you'll soon awaken your Magic Body Strengthening."

"Thank you, Your Grace."

"Adelia, I've heard your skills are quite impressive. Keep up the good work."

"Eh?! Oh, yes, yep. Th-thank… you."

"Ellen, it's always good to see you eating well. One day, all that food will come back as strength."

"Yes, sir."

Ellen cleverly deflected Duke Grantz's playful banter by calling him "sir."

Excluding Liana, we all looked at Ellen with amused expressions as she called Duke Grantz "sir." The Duke's reaction was even more priceless.

"Haha! I always enjoy being called 'sir'!"

No way.

Did she intentionally call him that…?

Now I understand why Ellen said Duke Grantz is a good person.

"Reinhardt, try to stay out of trouble."

"I-I'll do my best…"

After exchanging ambiguous pleasantries, Duke Grantz addressed Harriet.

"Uh… I apologize for this morning's breakfast incident."

"N-no, it's… it's fine. I'm okay."

Somehow, Duke Grantz seemed apologetic, and Harriet seemed even more flustered.

What exactly transpired during breakfast at the Grantz residence today?

We said our goodbyes to Duke Grantz and moved on towards the temple.

"Hey, wait a sec."

"Hmm?"

I let the others walk ahead and pulled Harriet aside slightly so our conversation wouldn't be overheard.

Of course, it wouldn't matter much if they heard.

"What did the Duchess say to you?"

"Ah… that?"

Harriet hesitated for a moment before shaking her head.

"You don't need to know."

That was all she would say.

"What? Why not? What is it?"

"You won't benefit from hearing it."

It was clear that there was nothing good about me hearing it.

"No, it's fine. Just tell me."

"I told you, you won't benefit from knowing!"

More than anything, Harriet was speaking in a very soft voice while glancing at Liana, even though they weren't discussing any particular secrets. Harriet clearly didn't want to talk about it, and then she looked me in the eye.

"Ah… I'm glad you're back to your usual self, but I didn't wish for you to bother me like this…"

Harriet let out a deep sigh and glanced at Liana, who was walking ahead of us.

"Come to the Magic Research Club when we get back."

It seemed like this wasn't a conversation to be had in Liana's presence. Harriet curtly said so.

CHAPTER 366

There were two reasons why Harriet hesitated to tell me about her conversation.

First, because no matter how it was perceived, it would ultimately lead to speaking ill of a friend's parents.

Second, she was worried that I might be hurt by hearing it.

After returning to the temple, Harriet and I had a conversation in the empty laboratory of the Magic Research Society mansion.

Harriet had been invited to breakfast.

The people present were the Duke of Grantz and the Duchess.

Harriet said the Duke of Grantz seemed flustered, as if he hadn't expected her to join them for breakfast.

Of course, Harriet, who was the only one invited to breakfast, must have been even more flustered.

"At first, they asked me about how our parents were doing, whether they had any plans to come to the royal capital, things like that."

It seemed that the Duchess was quite curious about Harriet de Saint-Owan, the daughter of the Archduke, rather than Harriet, the temple student.

Harriet hesitated, unsure if she should share this part of the story.

"And then… suddenly, they started saying they weren't sure if life at the temple was really a good thing… because…"

"What do you mean?"

"At the temple, even commoners receive education. So… when nobles or royals are ready to marry, their time at the temple can become a subject of gossip… Although

it's an unwritten rule not to talk about it, rumors still circulate… about who did what with whom, things like that…”

Ah.

I understood what she meant.

"So, they were saying that since anyone with money can enter the temple, noble-born students who mingle with commoners might face obstacles in marriage or other aspects of their lives later on?"

"What… what a way to put it! That's so vulgar!"

Harriet's face turned bright red as she exclaimed in response to my blunt description.

However, as I expressed it so coarsely, Harriet seemed to give up and slumped over the table.

"Anyway… what you're saying is true. Just being from the temple can make it difficult for both men and women to find a suitable marriage partner later on… That's the situation."

Harriet's braided hair was strewn haphazardly across the table.

Cute.

"So their 'value' decreases?"

"Va, value?! Your choice of words is really… But I can't help but agree. Yes, their 'value' decreases. That's why it's better for well-behaved young ladies to maintain proper manners and receive education from a private tutor at home, rather than associating with low-born people at a place like the temple… That way, they can find a good marriage later. That's what they were saying…”

"A marital dispute?"

"Yes…”

The Duke of Grantz exploded, and he and the Duchess had a huge fight in front of

Harriet.

That's why the Duke of Grantz apologized. He inadvertently showed his daughter's friend the spectacle of their marital discord.

Being of humble origin was ultimately an insult to all her friends who had come to play, so Harriet must have felt quite uncomfortable.

It wasn't something one should say to a friend's parents, but it seemed that the Duchess had not acquired the level of refinement that matched her pride.

"Anyway, you understand why I didn't want to talk about it?"

“…Yeah, I do."

In the end, it would inevitably become slander against her friend's parents, and she didn't want to speak of it, as it might hurt me with all the talk of humble origins.

"Honestly, I don't really know."

Harriet heaved a deep sigh.

"Seeking one's worth from others, who they marry, how they appear in the eyes of others. Focusing only on such things and living a life for that purpose… Yeah, as you said, the price of their body. Focusing only on their own value. If that's the proper behavior of a noble…”

Harriet looked at me.

"What's the difference between that and being a slave?"

Focusing too much on one's own value ultimately leads to becoming a commodity.

Living a lifestyle where one must behave demurely and not associate with the lowly in order to find someone who will buy them at a higher price.

Harriet said she didn't see how that was any different from the life of a slave.

"I don't think my value comes only from myself, but it doesn't come solely from other things either. That's why… it was uncomfortable."

Oh dear.

"Wow, it's incredible how much you've grown."

It's so impressive that I want to bite it, is it not?

As I vigorously ruffled her hair, Harriet's brow furrowed.

"Ah! What are you saying? Am I a child? Stop it!"

With her hair disheveled, Harriet yelled back.

"If the child who complained to Ludwig last year about how unpleasant it was to have B-class students in the A-class dormitory has come this far, it's a big deal."

"!!!!"

At my words, Harriet's face turned so red it looked like it would melt.

If there's a way to express 'I want to die from embarrassment' with a facial expression, it would be her.

"Well, don't bring up the past… It's not about nobles and commoners… I don't know… Idiot. I hate you. How can you remember that…?"

In the end, Harriet had nothing to say, pouting her lips and sulking.

She's fatally cute today. What should I do? Does she become like this when she realizes she has nothing to say?

Of course, the Duchess's attitude is not commendable, but it's not that strange either.

Rather, for those who have lived their whole lives receiving noble treatment, such a mindset might be natural. In fact, the setting is that many people refuse to enter the Temple because they dislike having to be educated alongside commoners and being without status, even though there are numerous royals and nobles in the Temple.

So, a noble with a position like that of Duchess Grantz would actually be quite common.

In truth, even Harriet was ashamed of her past self, who used to judge people by their talents and status. If I hadn't forced her to undergo immunity training, she would still be that kind of person.

"Come to think of it, the nobles and royals around me were surprisingly kind."

"Huh? All of a sudden?"

"No, really. Even though the Temple prohibits discrimination based on status, people could easily rely on their authority or status. But no one did that to me, right?"

At my words, Harriet gapes at me, dumbfounded.

"You insane… Do you really say that knowing how you've been treated at the Temple?"

They didn't bother me because they found it disgusting if they tried. Harriet nagged for a while, saying that I shouldn't be the one to talk about the kindness of the people around me.

I shouldn't be talking, considering I used to curse and throw punches when someone tried to suppress me.

No, that's not what I meant.

"No, not that, there were adults too."

"Adults?"

"Yes, like your parents or… you know, others."

The Duke of St. Owan said that status didn't matter since they would all end up in the same place.

Bertus claimed that everyone was equal under him.

Charlotte grew comfortable with me over time for her own reasons.

Even the Duke of Grantz seemed like a neighborly old man, given his actions.

Even the Emperor himself didn't necessarily expect me to show him respect when he treated me as an equal. Of course, that could be because of the positions Ellen and I held.

So, there were no arrogant and prideful nobles like the Duchess of Grantz around me.

No.

There were some.

Like Erich and Heinrich.

Heinrich became kinder after receiving a few blows from me, and Erich shrank back after seeing him get hit. Wait, didn't Erich get hit by me too? I completely forgot about that.

Hmm…

Harriet wasn't wrong.

Those people did suffer some kind of consequences because of me.

As the Duchess of Grantz exemplified an arrogant noble, I began to question what I had taken for granted.

"But Liana never really cared about status in the first place, did she?"

"Huh?"

Liana de Grantz.

She exuded an unapproachable atmosphere and had a cold expression, but in reality, she was easygoing, without any pretense. She treated people as they were.

She even dragged around a hopeless prisoner during the festival.

"It seemed that way…"

Liana would dislike or reject someone because of the person, not their background.

I had taken it for granted that the nobles and royals around me, whether they were students or parents, never mentioned status to me.

It turns out that treating commoners indifferently, like the Duke of Grantz, is the exception rather than the norm.

It's evident that Liana, despite pretending to dislike her father, was more influenced by him than her mother.

Everyone admired the way Father treated everyone equally, his noble demeanor and pride, and Mother, who valued authority very highly.

Because Liana took after her father, she had a laid-back and fearless personality.

Now, it was the final stretch.

Only one more step remained.

"What did they say to each other during their marital disputes?"

"Why do you keep asking me about that?"

"Watching a fight is the most entertaining thing in the world, isn't it? Besides, aren't you curious about how even the prestigious Duke's family has marital disputes?"

"No one is interested in that! You're really wicked!"

Unable to withstand my malicious question and persistence, Harriet grumbles with a tearful face.

Though Harriet didn't want to be in that position, her memory was excellent.

"Well… the Duke said that status doesn't define a person… that if one treated people like that, no one would remain by their side. His wife said… that such an attitude is why the nobles end up ruined in the temple… something like that…"

Though some of the words were unclear, it was now certain.

The Duke must have lost his temper, having his daughter's friend brought to the breakfast table without his daughter and being forced to listen to his wife's imposing

thoughts.

Anger can make one lose their reason.

Status does not define a person.

That statement said it all.

Duke Grantz must have been involved with the revolutionary faction.

Three days later.

"He is very thorough."

I was listening to Sarkegaar's report in my dormitory room in the temple.

"How thorough?"

"To the extent that I think your suspicion might be unfounded… I couldn't find anything at all."

Upon my instruction to investigate Duke Grantz, Sarkegaar immediately took action.

Although he wouldn't be able to enter places with excessive security, Duke Grantz's residence wasn't like that.

However, he couldn't find anything that would prove the Duke was connected to the revolutionary faction.

"If he really is involved, we might discover it with time… But someone that thorough wouldn't leave any evidence behind. It's impossible to decipher encrypted letters until we identify their patterns and methods. Nobles frequently use written correspondence, so it's hard to determine which of the many documents and letters written daily are related to the revolutionary faction. Even if we knew, we couldn't tell what the encrypted content contains. A seemingly mundane letter asking about one's well-being could very well be an encrypted message."

The last visit from Owen de Gatmora was likely a business visit rather than having

anything to do with the revolutionary faction.

My suspicion that Duke Grantz might be part of the revolutionary faction was due to several circumstances and the confirmed involvement of Owen de Gatmora.

If Duke Grantz really was part of the revolutionary faction, it meant that, contrary to the impression of a pleasant neighbor, he was a very thorough individual.

Sarkegaar had not discovered any concrete evidence.

"However, I believe your judgment is sound."

"Why?"

But Sarkegaar agreed that Duke Grantz was a member of the revolutionary forces.

"I too am involved in the imperial social circles under the name of Count Argon Ponteus."

"I see."

"Everyone knows the rumor that the current Duke of Grantz, Arthur de Grantz, eloped with a commoner woman he met at the temple."

"Ah."

So, the typical story of someone who ruined their life by going to the temple was referring to this.

"And then, what happened?"

"If he had succeeded in eloping, he couldn't be the Duke of Grantz, could he?"

Elopement with a commoner.

And failure.

"Isn't that enough of a background to make someone resent their own social status and origins?"

Sarkegaar, dressed as a maid, showed her white teeth and wickedly smiled with her elegant and graceful face.

Please.

Didn't he realize that his expression made him appear about three times more wicked than he actually was?

Anyway, that meant the current Duke and Duchess of Grantz were in a marriage of convenience.

"Of course, the Duchess of Grantz wasn't originally that sensitive about social status."

"I don't know much about her, but the Duchess seemed like a rather stubborn person?"

I'm sorry, Liana.

But your mother is really stubborn.

Ah, sorry… I apologize.

At my words, Sarkegaar tilted her head with a "Hmm" expression.

"When you think about it, the Duchess of Grantz has her own story. She had no choice but to become that kind of person."

Having spent a considerable amount of time in the aristocratic life, Sarkegaar had quite a bit of background knowledge about social circles and the nature of nobles without any prior investigation.

"The Duke of Grantz doesn't involve himself in social circles, but the Duchess is a bit different."

"Hmm…"

"However, at every social gathering or party she attends, she unknowingly bears that kind of label."

Sarkegaar laughed ominously.

"The person who married the Duke of Grantz, who failed to elope for love, under the pressure of the family."

"The person who was bound to have a failed marriage."

"The person doomed from the start to never receive her husband's love."

"The wicked woman who married the Duke of Grantz, enduring the shameful rumors for the allure of his power."

Listening to this was chilling.

"She is an aristocrat whose status rose because she married the Duke of Grantz, a man surrounded by rumors. Originally, she was just the second daughter of a poor count's family without even a fiefdom. She became a pitiful and foolish woman whose very existence turned into a scandal."

What she gained by marrying a man with scandals was the power of the title, Duchess of Grantz.

But in the social circles, she was followed by rumors of being a wicked woman who discarded her dignity for a rise in status.

That's why she couldn't help but become a person obsessed with the power and prestige of being the Duchess of Grantz, which she had obtained by enduring all those things.

Despite loathing the cold wind, in the end, they couldn't deny the fact that they had gained everything because of it.

"Such a marriage could not have been smooth."

The duke, who had failed to escape the bonds of love and was ultimately caught.

Knowing his situation, the duchess had entered into a strategic marriage with the noble family for the sake of social advancement.

The duchess became obsessed with the power and prestige she believed she had gained from the failed marriage. For if she denied even that, it would mean she had chosen a failed life.

The duke had been forced into the marriage.

The fact that they had no children apart from Liana was evidence that their marriage had failed. At least they were fortunate to have Liana.

The duchess, who had no choice but to become fixated on social status.

The duke, who must have constantly pondered and cursed the nature of social status while watching his wife.

Moreover, he was from the Orbis class, which had long been a cradle of revolutionary forces.

As Sarkegaar had said, there was no evidence, but there were too many suspicious circumstances.

Just as Charlotte was convinced that Valier was the successor to the Demon King due to an overwhelming amount of circumstantial evidence, though there was no decisive proof.

Due to too many suspicious circumstances, the Duke of Grantz was now in a situation where it was impossible for him not to have joined the revolutionary forces.

They had thought about various concerns regarding the Duke of Grantz being part of the revolutionary forces, but in the end, there were no answers.

"Fine. Either way, whether the Duke of Grantz is really involved or not, we'll naturally find out when we make contact with the higher-ups. What's their opinion on me not attending?"

"They seemed disappointed, but the meeting with the higher-ups is about to take place, and Your Highness is expected to attend. If the duke is a core member, he will be there as well."

"Good. Everything will become clear then."

However, in the end, a possibility was merely a possibility.

There was still not enough information to come to any conclusion, and even if I knew

the Duke of Grantz was part of the revolutionary forces, it was still not a stage where that could become a card for me.

CHAPTER 367

Deep into the night.

After a brief walk, Duke Grantz sat quietly in his study.

With the lights turned off in his study, he was lost in thought within the darkness.

He was recalling the conversation he had not long ago, when Owen de Gatmora had paid him a personal visit.

Owen would only come in person for urgent matters, and Duke Grantz agreed that this was one of those times.

Negotiations with the remnants of the demon world.

"They stipulated that instead of you attending the meeting personally, all members of the council must be present. They are well aware of the exact number of council members, so if anyone is absent, there is a high possibility that the negotiations will fail."

"Could it be a trap?"

"However, they have also stated that they will permit any number of escorts."

"Confidence, perhaps?"

"It seems so. They've slaughtered the elite holy knights, including Riverrier Lanze, so they probably believe they can fend off any surprise attack."

He was reminiscing about the meeting with Owen de Gatmora a few days earlier.

"I must say it again, shaking hands with the demons is madness."

"I do think the same, but the majority of the command's opinions have already been unified."

"We don't know what they're thinking, or what their ulterior motives are. We know too little about them to join hands simply because they possess power."

"I deeply agree with your opinion, Your Grace. We can't decide everything on the spot, and the Demon King will not act hastily either. After all, attacking us would be the worst of the worst for them."

There had been ongoing discussions about joining forces with the remnants of the demon world and the next Demon King.

However, due to the difficulty of gathering all the council members in one place, opinions were collected through written correspondence or by people actually going back and forth to relay messages.

The organization was thrown into chaos when they heard that the remnants of the demon world had seized control of the trade guild master.

They couldn't even tell where the demons had sniffed them out from.

However, Owen told them that when the demons first contacted him, they had already identified some of the council members' identities and now knew everyone's.

"We have no choice, Your Grace."

"…"

Joining hands with the demons is the worst of the worst.

Even if the revolution succeeds, it will be suspected of insincerity from the start. Such a revolution cannot be sustained.

However, the demons have already gathered all the information about them.

If they don't join hands, the demons can easily eliminate them all by merely informing the empire about the revolutionary forces.

It's almost as if they should be grateful for the demons' mercy.

At least they're taking action to work together, rather than trying to eliminate the

demons without laying a hand on them.

Die at the hands of the empire or ally with a dangerous enemy.

One had to choose between the two.

But at the moment when the demons reached out their hands,

Duke Grantz had already sensed that the revolution had failed.

If the uprising failed, then it was a failure, and if they joined hands with the enemies of humanity and succeeded, there would be no guarantee for the future, so it was still a failure.

There seemed to be no way to avoid failure.

'Is there nothing… I can do?'

According to Owen, a significant number of the organization's leaders welcomed the situation with open arms.

Was this really a situation to be happy about, as their power was increasing?

Duke Grantz was feeling a terrible sense of unease.

Had the revolution failed?

No, was it even possible to succeed in the first place?

Internal factions were divided and argued, conflicts arose between those from the Orbis class and the non-Orbis class members of the organization, and political infighting was rampant within. They had become accustomed to such strife.

A revolutionary organization that had never actually carried out a revolution.

A very old one.

Without a revolution, they merely stifled their breath, rotting from within while growing in size. Could they really have carried out a revolution?

"…"

Duke Grantz left his office and walked down the hallway. No matter how long he pondered, the conclusion had already been reached.

Even without his consent, the organization had made its decision.

Being part of the organization meant that there were times when he had to follow, even if the organization acted against his will.

This was just one of those times.

“What does any of that matter?”

A sharp voice pierced the ear of the Duke, who was walking down the hallway lost in complex thoughts.

He thought she had returned to the temple, but it seemed his daughter had come back.

“I've told you countless times not to mingle with those lowlifes. Now it's not enough to bring a few of them here, you've invited them to have a drinking party? If word of this gets out…”

“And what will you do if it does?”

Hearing the quarrel between mother and daughter, the Duke sighed as if this were a familiar occurrence.

If it weren't for her extreme difficulty in sleeping anywhere but at home, she wouldn't have set foot in the house. The Duke's daughter disliked home, but she found it incredibly difficult to sleep anywhere else.

“You may not care now, but all of this will leave scars on you, don't you understand? Must you experience it firsthand to regret it? Leave the temple immediately and return home! Whether you receive lessons from a nun or call a private tutor, I will take care of everything.”

“Hah. If living like you, after taking lessons from a nun, means having a life like that, then I don't want it even if it's given to me.”

“Wh, what did you just say?”

“If I have to live like you, I'd rather live among commoners like this. At least I don't want to live a life where I step on people like you do.”

The Duke stood in the hallway, unable to intervene or turn away from the conversation, listening to the exchange from afar.

Thanks to the strict confidentiality of the servants, this conversation would not leak outside, but those who needed to know already knew.

They all knew that the Grantz Duchy was a mess.

“Will you run away and marry a commoner, like your father did?”

"You really think that's what I want? To run away and marry a commoner? I'm trying to escape from you, Mother."

The cold voice of the young duchess was met with an even colder response from her mother.

"What… did you say?"

"Father never got what he wanted, and you, Mother, got everything you wanted but still couldn't be happy. So why are you forcing me to live like you?"

"How… how can you say that to your mother?"

From a young age, the daughter had never been one to listen to her mother. But the duchess was no weakling either; among the people the duke knew, she was one of the fiercest.

As the daughter grew older, the conflict between mother and daughter intensified, never weakening.

Knowing that her mother disapproved, the daughter would still bring her friends to the mansion. She knew her mother wouldn't openly criticize her in front of commoners for the sake of appearances.

"Stop treating my friends like that, being so openly discriminatory. If you keep it up,

I'll make sure you end up with no child at all, as if I never existed. Be careful."

"You… you! Liana! Don't go in there!"

"Bang!"

Upon slamming the door to her mother's room, Liana's face turned beet red. She encountered the duke in the corridor, who had been listening to their conversation.

"…"

"…"

The daughter didn't scold him for eavesdropping. Instead, she stared at him intently, her eyes twisted with anger.

"My child. Your father is…"

"On my side?"

As the daughter interrupted his words, the duke was left speechless.

"I'm on your side."

It was a phrase he often said.

"Like mother wants me to live the life she lived, father wants me to live the life he couldn't."

Bound by his social status, he couldn't have what he wanted most.

The duke had always encouraged her to live a life where she could pursue her own desires.

But in the end, it was still coercion, even if the meaning of their words was different. Both mother and father were forcing a certain life upon her, and that was no different.

Upon hearing Liana's words, the duke couldn't help but close his mouth in shame.

"I'm sick of both mother and father treating me as the only reason their failed marriage has to continue."

Liana brushed past the duke, her steps quick and determined.

Instead of returning to her room, she left the mansion to head back to the temple. The duke watched her with a bitter smile.

The only reason for their failed marriage to continue: their daughter.

At some point, she had begun to view herself as the miserable outcome of their union.

Did it hurt her to think that way?

Did she realize her life held no more meaning than that?

From time to time, the daughter drank alone and fell asleep.

Countless times, the duke had seen the tear stains left on her sleeping face.

He watched as she strode across the garden, leaving the mansion behind.

The winter night sky was overcast.

Two days later.

In the small country of Levaina in the southern part of the empire.

Nighttime.

Duke Grantz moved for a meeting with the next Demon King, who had caused a stir throughout the continent.

It was rare for the leaders of the republican revolutionary organization to gather in one place directly.

This was because it was already somewhat suspicious for those who occupied

various sectors of society to gather in one place without a particular reason.

Thus, the general assembly, where all the leaders gather, would not be convened unless there was an extremely important issue.

This was the first time it had been held since the closure of the Orbis Class after the last incident.

The assembly's meeting place was not the imperial capital but one of the merchant guild branches located in the southern part of the continent. It was disguised as a gathering of southern trade business investors of the merchant guild.

Though the Demon King offered to prepare as many escorts as necessary, it couldn't be done.

Duke Grantz only moved with trustworthy knights from his ducal house and family mages. Although they were few in number, Duke Grantz believed that even with this small group, they could escape if the demon remnants had a change of heart, even if they could not directly confront them.

In the southern part of the empire, one of the merchant guild branches was located on the outskirts of the capital of the Kingdom of Levaina, Rajeurn.

They chose a quiet place rather than an overly glamorous location near the city center, as it could attract attention. Naturally, the merchant guild master was the one who had selected the location.

Upon arriving at the meeting room, Duke Grantz saw numerous people who had already arrived.

These were individuals who each held a place in various sectors of society, regardless of their background, including nobles, high-ranking officials, writers, and scholars.

The Demon King had not yet arrived.

While the assembly wasn't held often, they could at least exchange polite greetings under normal circumstances. However, this time it was different.

Now they were preparing for a meeting with the Demon King, who had turned the

entire continent upside down.

Whether they agreed or not, everyone's faces showed a mix of anxiety, anticipation, fear, and skepticism, which is why no one dared to speak casually.

The guards could not enter this far.

However, it was clear that everyone had prepared a teleport scroll for emergency escape.

After all seventeen leaders had gathered on time,

Duke Grantz felt slightly puzzled.

The merchant guild master.

Owen de Gatmora was not in his seat.

He was not one of the leaders, but he was responsible for the finances of the revolutionary forces and was a high-ranking officer. Also, since he had directly contacted the Demon King's servant, he should have been present as a liaison.

Soon, the cause of his unease revealed itself.

-Grrrooowwlll!

A sound that should not be heard in the human world began to echo.

"What is… going on?"

One by one, people got up and looked out the window.

-Flash!

-Flash!

As light scattered in the vacant lot, one by one, something began to appear.

Light scattered across the empty lot, and one by one, something began to appear.

Ogres.

Orcs.

Goblins.

Numerous demons, including imps, emerged simultaneously.

Countless demons with reddish glints in their eyes were arriving through spatial teleportation, wrapped in light.

"The demons are here!"

"Could it be that they-"

They had claimed they wanted a negotiation, but was their true intention to attack?

Demons arriving through teleportation began to swarm towards the Merchant Guild branch, the site of the negotiation.

This was an area on the outskirts of the city. They couldn't rely on the help of the guards, and even if the guards arrived as quickly as possible for an attack of this scale, the battle would have already ended by the time they got there.

"Let's run!"

Upon someone's outcry, everyone seemed to have been waiting for the cue, and they all pulled out their teleport scrolls.

They had prepared various methods of escape for emergencies. And this was true for Duke Grantz as well.

Fwsh!

However, the teleport scroll that should have emitted light and transported them somewhere else showed no response.

"Spacial teleportation… blocked?"

Someone muttered in a daze.

The teleport scroll wasn't activating.

But a barrier that blocks spatial teleportation isn't something that can be set up quickly.

Yet, the barrier was clearly present now.

"It's alright. The escorts we've brought should be more than enough to hold off this level of attack. If we can break through and escape the range of the spatial teleportation barrier, we'll be able to move freely."

Although not numerous, the escorts they had brought were the elite of the elite.

Bang! Crash!

Knights and mages, who had rushed out in response to the sudden attack, began to counter the demons with red-tinted eyes.

While the number of demons was indeed large, stopping them shouldn't be too difficult.

The demons had miscalculated. They couldn't possibly wipe out the leaders of the revolutionary forces with just this.

But Duke Grantz felt uneasy.

The spatial magic barrier.

The red-tinted eyes of the demons.

Without any focus.

Rooooar!

Thud! Boom!

They were merely swinging their weapons wildly without any proper grip.

'Mind control…?'

He couldn't shake the thought that the demons had been subjected to some sort of magical intervention.

Of course, the escorts they had brought were not amateurs who would simply stand there and be hit by the wildly swung weapons.

The attacking demons were being slaughtered without even inflicting a scratch.

"What do they take us for?"

Seeing the demons getting overwhelmingly slaughtered after their surprise attack, the leaders spoke with dumbfounded voices.

They weren't all fools.

Although they were fortunate to be winning.

They all knew that this was far too sloppy for a surprise attack.

And then.

Duke Grantz soon discovered who the real enemy was amidst the onslaught of demons.

People dressed in black were swinging their swords from the shadows.

"A knight…?"

Someone's sword was dyed in a dark blue hue.

Aura Blade.

It was the mark of a Swordmaster.

A group containing a Swordmaster, a powerful asymmetrical force even on their own, began to crush their escort forces.

"Are the demons at that level…?"

"No."

Duke Grantz muttered blankly as he watched the escort forces being cut down in the blink of an eye.

"There's no way they're demons…"

The spatial movement was blocked, and along with the demons, numerous veteran knights slaughtered everyone like fallen leaves.

Duke Grantz could find a familiar face among the black-clad figures.

"Saviolin Turner…"

The leader of Shanafel was there.

The escort forces were annihilated in an instant.

The attacking demons collapsed right where they were as soon as the escort forces were wiped out, as if they were empty husks.

Thud, thud.

Everyone could hear the footsteps approaching the conference room.

Unable to escape, the black-clad figures revealed themselves one by one in the conference room.

Despite the carnage, there wasn't a single drop of blood on their clothes, displaying their terrifying skills.

No one could flee.

Everyone in this place knew Saviolin Turner's face.

With a calm expression, the leader of Shanafel surveyed the conference room before taking a seat in one of the empty chairs.

"Do you think the Empire was unaware of your existence?"

That was all she calmly said.

The demons hadn't betrayed them.

The place where the spatial movement barrier was set up.

The person who arranged the meeting location.

The person who convinced everyone to gather here.

"Owen… He lured us here."

Owen de Gatmora.

Everyone belatedly realized that he had been lying from the beginning to the end.

Then what was the purpose of the demons' attack?

Duke Grantz gritted his teeth as he stared at Saviolin Turner.

"Don't tell me, you're trying to disguise this as the work of demons…!"

The leadership is here, but the revolutionary forces themselves are scattered everywhere.

Even if the leadership dies, the will for revolution cannot be killed.

"Yes, from now on your organization will be under the control of the Empire. The master of the Merchant Guild will become the leader of the next revolutionary organization."

Duke Grantz didn't know whose outrageous idea it was to utilize the revolutionary forces.

"Within the organization, you will all be treated as having died after negotiations broke down while discussing cooperation with the demonic forces. Of course, externally, it will be treated as death due to an unfortunate attack."

Saviolin Turner explained this much as if she could at least give that to those who were going to die.

And then, She gestured towards the Shanafel knights, who had become assassins rather than knights today.

"Kill them all. Don't leave any external wounds, as we need to manipulate the corpses and signs."

With that cold declaration, one by one, lives began to be snuffed out.

CHAPTER 368

At that moment, Sarkegaar, disguised, was in contact with Owen de Gatmora.

Upon arriving at the location where the brain trust meeting was said to take place, Sarkegaar encountered only one person.

Owen de Gatmora.

No one else was present.

“…What sort of trick is this?"

At Sarkegaar's words, muffled by his black robe, Owen de Gatmora closed his eyes slightly.

"Actually, I wish to convey an impertinent message."

"Impertinent?"

"Yes, quite impertinent."

Owen spoke while looking at the mysterious figure in the black robe.

"The Imperial Royal Family wishes to borrow your names without permission just this once."

“…What do you mean?"

The Royal Family was mentioned by a member of the revolutionary faction. Sarkegaar sensed that the situation had become twisted in a bizarre way.

"Due to a previous incident, the Royal Family has learned that borrowing your names can help resolve complicated matters quite easily."

Through those words, Sarkegaar naturally realized.

Owen de Gatmora was a traitor.

"So, my confessing directly like this is to inform you that I don't wish to create an uncomfortable relationship with your side, but to resolve the Empire's problems."

"…"

"The First Prince wishes to maintain a good relationship with you all. He also acknowledges that you are needed by the Empire."

The First Prince.

Bertus de Gardias.

Sarkegaar believed he was in contact with the revolutionary forces, but in reality, he had encountered a spy of Bertus.

"So, whatever happens this time, I sincerely hope that you can understand with a generous heart."

They were planning to do something under the name of Darkland.

"Even if the First Prince doesn't know, do you think you'll be safe?"

"Regardless of whether I'm connected to the revolutionary forces or the Royal Family, you can obtain what you want through me. In fact, isn't it better for you to deal with the Imperial Royal Family rather than the revolutionary forces?"

In front of the unidentified demon, Owen de Gatmora didn't show any signs of panic, loss of composure, or fear.

"Isn't that enough?"

The words of the Merchant Guild Master were true.

However, the fact that they were being used left a bad taste in Sarkegaar's mouth.

They were ultimately weak.

Just because they wanted to use them didn't mean they could do so without any

issues.

Like this, they could be used by a completely unexpected force.

Saviolin Turner, dressed in a black camouflage outfit, silently watched the corpse-filled conference room with the Shanafel Knights.

It was a dirty job.

Although it involved executing the traitors of the Empire, they had to disguise it as the work of demons.

Saviolin Turner agreed with Bertus's statement that this was the best course of action.

However, looking at the massacre and the acts of disguising the cause of death as the work of demons, even she, desensitized to slaughter, felt like she was going to retch.

Was it truly necessary to go this far?

Among the revolutionary forces, there were faces she recognized.

Some of them were people she never expected to see here, and one of them stood right before Saviolin Turner.

Her eyes wide open, she looked at the lifeless body of Duke Arthur de Grantz.

And then.

Though it was just a nominal title, she had occasionally encountered her as a supervising teacher.

"Follow me, you say?"

"Ah, got it…"

"Am I going to eat you? Why are you always so nervous? Oh, hello? Should I call you a teacher? Or should I call you Lady Turner?"

"Teacher is fine."

"Ah, yes. Hello, teacher."

A slightly rough, but always bright, young girl's image overlapped.

What would happen to that child's expression from now on? How would that child live?

She hadn't seen it with her eyes, but she felt like she knew without seeing. Saviolin Turner gritted her teeth.

Saviolin Turner closed the wide-open eyes of Duke Grantz.

Although she knew it wouldn't make anything better, she felt like she had to do it anyway.

"How did you divert the guards' attention?"

"I expect the guards to arrive here in about 15 minutes."

"Good. We'll withdraw first."

Saviolin Turner had completed her secret mission.

She had a premonition that another storm would arise in the empire.

Emperatos Imperial Palace, Winter Palace.

Bertus was drinking tea.

It was not his usual black tea or milk tea, but a tea with a green hue.

Bertus was not alone.

"It's called green tea. Have you ever tasted it? The leaves are the same as black tea, but the taste is quite different."

Before Bertus, equally a royal, Oscar de Gardias sat stiffly.

"No… I've heard of it, but never tasted it…"

"Is that so? Then you must not know what it tastes like?"

"That's… right."

When Oscar was called by Bertus, he felt an odd fear. They often encountered or conversed with each other as fellow royals, but it was very rare for Bertus to summon him directly.

"Please, have a taste."

"Uh, yeah… Sure."

At Bertus's invitation, Oscar took a sip of green tea, but he had no time to savor the trembling taste and the fragrance that touched his nose.

Why.

Me.

That thought was all that filled his mind. Bertus stared intently at Oscar, who had taken a sip of green tea.

"How is it?"

"Well… the fragrance is pleasant…"

"Now that you know the taste and aroma of green tea, you might be able to dream of drinking it."

Not understanding the meaning of his words, Oscar felt chills all over his body before he could become bewildered. Bertus gazed at Oscar with a subtle smile.

"Do you think someone who has never tasted green tea can dream of drinking it? No, they might dream of it, but can they experience the same taste and aroma?"

"Ah? No… that can't be…"

"Exactly. One cannot experience sensations in a dream that they have never felt before."

The unknown cannot be known.

Thus, it cannot be dreamt.

Only by experiencing it firsthand can a sensation be reproduced in a dream.

"A person who has never eaten meat might dream of eating it, but the taste, texture, and aroma in that dream will be nonexistent or entirely different from reality. The same goes for everything else. In the end, that's all it is."

Bertus took another sip of his green tea, gazing at the wintry landscape.

"You can't dream about what you don't know. Even if you do, it'll be vastly different from the real thing."

"…"

"But I don't understand why people yearn for dreams about things they have never known or experienced. They don't even know what it is or what kind of world it might be."

Oscar's fingers were trembling. He tried to hide it, but he simply couldn't.

Bertus's gaze and words, though not violent or aggressive, pierced deeply through Oscar's heart.

"I don't understand why everyone is so eager to dream about a world they can't see or know."

Oscar couldn't bear to meet Bertus's eyes.

"Do you… plan to kill me?"

At Oscar's pitiful words, Bertus laughed lightly.

"Brother, killing someone means they pose a significant threat to me, or their death would somehow benefit me."

"…"

"Your life holds little value or threat to me, or the empire."

A worthless life.

At those words, Oscar stared wide-eyed at the tea water.

He was a member of the revolutionary forces, but not among their leaders. He wasn't even that important there.

That's why he wasn't a crucial target for Bertus, even now.

"Killing a member of the royal family over a mere ant's dream? It's more pitiful than anything, hardly worth stepping on."

Oscar couldn't say a word against Bertus's blatant contempt and sarcasm.

"So, from now on, know your place and behave accordingly."

"…"

"Answer me."

At Bertus's cold command, Oscar opened his trembling lips.

"I'll… remember that."

Oscar de Gardias was an ant.

An ant can do nothing when its dreams crumble before its eyes.

After Oscar de Gardias retreated, Bertus downed the now-cold green tea in one gulp.

In the overcast sky, the rain began to drizzle.

"I wanted to express my gratitude in person, if possible."

-Sssshhh

With a gloomy smile, Bertus stared quietly at the window as the winter rain began to fall.

Not long ago, Bertus had summoned Saviolin Turner to the Winter Palace.

"What is the task I must undertake?"

"It is to root out the cancerous cells of the empire."

"Cancerous cells…?"

"Have you heard of the republican revolution?"

The Emperor had already granted permission.

Bertus explained to Saviolin Turner about the series of events that had occurred since the closure of the Orbis-class school.

Bertus had been aware of the revolutionary forces for quite some time. Just as Charlotte knew that such a situation was inevitable.

They had already identified a few key members and even some minor figures.

However, it was difficult to address them recklessly, as they were like volatile bombs, and time was spent on grasping the whole picture.

It wasn't until the visit of the Merchant Guild Master, Owen de Gatmora, that the situation was accurately assessed.

Through the business of Reinhardt's Magic Research Society and the Rotary Club, Bertus' forces had gained a direct connection with the Merchant Guild.

Until then, the connection had been indirect, but since then, a close link had been formed between Bertus' forces and the Merchant Guild, knowingly or unknowingly.

Owen requested a private meeting with Bertus and confided in him about the revolutionary forces.

He claimed to have very important information concerning the fate of the empire.

However, it was not an easy matter to handle. The exposed revolutionary forces mostly consisted of people who could exert significant influence on the empire, and if the royal family directly intervened in handling them, it could trigger a massive uprising from the remaining forces.

Thus, they were keeping an eye on the situation through Owen de Gatmora, who volunteered to be a spy, while trying to find a suitable method.

And then.

The demons appeared.

"We will gather the leaders in one place, and after eliminating them all, we'll disguise it as an attack by the demons."

The demons provided a powerful smokescreen that could conceal the truth behind all the incidents. There might be people who could deduce the truth, but the message of the demon remnants had too strong an impact across the entire continent.

With a single mention of the demons, all minor noises could be brushed aside.

After slaughtering all the leaders, they would disguise it as the act of the demons.

The remnants of the republican revolutionary forces might think it was a conspiracy by the empire, but the general public would be deceived by the mention of the demon and not see the truth.

In fact.

The demon remnants tried to make contact with the revolutionary forces and succeeded in doing so.

Thus, it would be persuasive to the remnants that the leaders were massacred by the demon's attack. It wouldn't be unconvincing to say that something went wrong at the negotiation table, and the enraged demons slaughtered the leaders and disappeared.

There would be debates within the remnant forces about whether it was truly the act of the demons or not, but their divisions would not be harmful in themselves.

And then, Owen de Gatmora would take on the role of the temporary leader,

absorbing the remaining revolutionary forces. He would then publicize a falsified truth regarding the deaths of the leaders.

The revolutionary forces would fall entirely into the hands of the royal family.

Upon hearing Bertus's plan, Saviolin Turner nodded with a stern expression.

She was devoted to the empire.

Thus, she agreed that those seeking to overthrow the empire must be eliminated.

"But how do you plan to disguise it as the work of demons?" she asked.

"We have some demon captives being used for research purposes. We simply release them at the scene and kill them afterward."

“…I see."

"So, it's a secret that Shanafel is deployed at the scene. There will be support to handle the scene manipulation. Shanafel's main focus should be on cleanly eliminating the escort troops. Can you do that?"

“…Yes, I can."

The emperor's approval had been secured beforehand.

A barrier to block spatial teleportation magic had already been set up at the meeting place arranged by Owen.

Shanafel would kill all the revolutionary leaders, manipulate the corpses' wounds, and scatter demon bodies to disguise the scene as a battle against demons.

The conditions and meeting place were selected to make such a disguise as easy as possible.

They were like thorns in one's mouth, difficult to remove.

The remnants of the demon forces.

The conveniently timed excuse would shield the empire from all controversy.

It didn't matter if the truth was revealed.

It was a fact that the revolutionary forces had dared to betray humanity by trying to join hands with demons.

-Aaaah

Bertus looked out at the falling winter rain.

"Tsk."

In the end,

The fact that he had killed the parents of his classmates weighed heavily on him.

CHAPTER 369

The news of the demon race attacking the city of Rajeurn, in the Kingdom of Levaina, in the southern part of the Empire, had spread throughout the empire.

To be precise, it was an assault on the outer branch of the merchant guild in Rajeurn. In reality, the demons had attacked Rajeurn as well.

However, the damage wasn't significant, as the number of demons in the attack was quite small.

Nevertheless, a considerable number of casualties had occurred in an outpost area that had no guard forces.

That place was the outer branch of the merchant guild in Rajeurn.

Included in the list of victims was the name of the Duke of Grantz, Arthur de Grantz.

He has already heard the report from Sarkegaar.

He was manipulated by Bertus.

It was puzzling why the imperial family couldn't detect the revolutionary forces, but they already had. They just didn't take any action, fearing that it might cause significant problems if they did.

When the nameless monastery was attacked, Bertus had made a completely different judgment, seeing that the mere fact of a demon attack had buried all other suspicious aspects.

He decided that the revolutionary forces could be eliminated in the same manner.

The name "demonic remnants" is a kind of root of all evil that can cause all kinds of incidents and turn everything upside down in the current situation.

The corpses of demons, the traces of manipulated battles, countless victims, and newspapers containing photos of the scene and the names of the victims.

I was staring at it with wide eyes.

Duke Grantz.

Arthur de Grantz.

He had met his death due to a demon attack in a small country in the southern part of the empire.

"Why on earth did this happen…”

Harriet covered her face and cried, reminded of the day she had spent at the Grantz estate not too long ago.

Ellen was staring at the newspaper with bulging eyes, as if to confirm that she wasn't seeing it wrong.

"Let's go see Liana."

Ellen said this as she quietly put down the newspaper.

Swoosh

Winter rain was falling.

Cliffman, Adelia, Harriet, Ellen, and I, who had gone to visit the Duke's house, came to see Liana as we were.

It would take time for the body to be retrieved and returned to the Grantz estate. There were already many people at the Grantz estate.

Whether they were relatives or not, I didn't know, but the empty expression of the Duchess, surrounded by many people and receiving consolation, spoke of the shock she was feeling.

Liana was no exception.

"Huh? Ah… You, you came?"

Harriet gently held Liana's hand, but Liana seemed not to understand what had happened to her.

Liana's spirit was gone. She should have been grieving, but she didn't even seem to have a proper sense of what had befallen her.

No one knew how to comfort someone in such a situation.

The people around the Duchess were saying something, but we didn't know what to say.

I couldn't.

I didn't know what to say to Liana, who had experienced something that had become my doing, even though it wasn't.

I didn't do it.

I didn't do anything.

But I couldn't say that.

Harriet quietly held Liana's hand, while Ellen gently embraced her by the shoulders.

"…"

Liana stared blankly into the void, her eyes unfocused.

We stayed at the Duke of Grantz's residence.

The duchess, sensitive to nobility, did not treat us harshly as we stayed in her mansion amidst the turmoil.

At least, she was an adult.

"Thank you, everyone. Please look after Liana."

She seemed genuinely grateful that we remained here to tend to Liana's condition.

Unlike Liana, the duchess couldn't just wallow in sadness. Once the body was retrieved, she had to arrange a funeral. To do so, she had to converse with many people who came to visit. Someone had to keep their wits about them in this sudden situation, and that person was the duchess.

The next day.

The body of the Duke of Grantz was retrieved and returned to the mansion.

Liana stared blankly at the coffin, her eyes wide.

She knew what was inside, but it seemed she couldn't believe it was truly there.

The duchess staggered towards the coffin and opened it once to take custody of the body.

-Aaahhh!

We all stared blankly as the duchess collapsed on the spot. Liana gazed at her numbly.

"Oh, Father… Father…?"

Liana stumbled closer to the coffin. Harriet helplessly watched her, unable to stop or grab her.

Liana cast her gaze down at the half-opened coffin.

Liana didn't cry.

She just stared blankly at something inside the coffin, as if she'd received an enormous shock.

Soon.

-Ah, uh…

From Liana's twisted lips, a suppressed moan began to flow.

-Ah, ugh… uh. Ugh! Uh! Ahhhhhhh!

Liana started tearing at her own hair.

And then.

-Crack!

Eerie lightning streaked across the pale winter sky, carving a path through the heavens.

-Crack! Crack!

-Rumble!

The dozens of lightning bolts and ensuing thunder that colored the sky fortunately didn't strike the ground.

-Ahhhhhhh!

However, it was clearly not a normal weather phenomenon.

Supernaturals awaken their powers under extreme stress or dire situations.

As I had strengthened myself through several self-suggestion sessions and eventually awakened word magic.

Liana de Grantz was no exception.

The dozens of lightning bolts now connected the heavens, but it was uncertain whether Liana, who had lost her reason, would strike the ground with lightning.

Everyone already realized that this bizarre weather phenomenon had originated from Liana.

The sky was going mad.

We must stop Liana.

Crackling, crackle-crackle!

And then, as if torturing herself, blue sparks began to furiously ignite around Liana,

who was tearing at her hair.

This is dangerous. People around the area might be swept away by Liana's rampage.

Before I could say anything.

Whoosh!

Ellen charged through the sparks towards Liana.

Crackle-crackle!

Ellen, with her Magic Body Strengthening, broke through the currents surging around Liana and struck her precisely on the nape of her neck.

Without hesitation, Ellen dove into the lethal lightning, one strike of which could have been life-threatening.

Thud!

Ellen effortlessly caught Liana's body, which had been neutralized and collapsed in an instant.

Everyone looked at Ellen with wide-eyed expressions, as if they had no idea what had just happened.

In the midst of an already dire situation, Ellen had quickly averted a secondary disaster.

Ellen spoke to the duchess.

“I'll take her inside.”

“Th-Thank you…”

The duchess nodded her head, staring at Ellen with a complex expression.

A short while later, Liana awoke in her bedroom at the mansion.

"…"

Liana felt a throbbing headache as if her head was ringing.

Her body felt heavy, like a soaked cotton ball. Liana stared blankly at the ceiling.

It could be a dream.

A bad dream, perhaps.

She often had strange dreams after drinking too much.

So, although she didn't know when she had started drinking or when she had passed out, all these events could be just a dream.

Liana felt a vague hope.

Dreams could be agonizingly long, after all. It could be an extension of that.

In reality, hadn't she only heard unreal, floating sounds? Suddenly, her father had died, the authorities had come to the mansion, and inside them…

She saw something she never wanted to admit.

Dreams would break under excessive shock. She might have woken up from a terrible dream after seeing such a thing.

She wanted to believe that.

'I'm sick and tired of being treated as the only reason Mom and Dad's failed marriage has to continue.'

She wanted to swallow those words.

She shouldn't have treated him like that if she thought it would be their last encounter.

So, from now on, whoever she meets or talks to…

She should think that she might never see them again and be more considerate.

Especially to her father.

Since she had realized that.

Now she would apologize for those words, not be a daughter who worsens an already strained relationship between her parents but at least not be a hindrance.

Now she regretted all the days she had ignored her father's efforts and berated him.

She would change.

If it was a dream.

That's what she thought.

But it wasn't a dream.

It couldn't be.

Absentmindedly staring at the ceiling, her right and left hands were each tightly gripping someone's hand.

On one side was Adelia, and on the other was Harriet.

If only everything had been a dream.

These children wouldn't be looking at her with such worried gazes, holding her hands tightly.

Liana closed her eyes tightly.

If it hadn't been a dream.

She wanted to escape into a dream, but even that wasn't possible.

Tears of misery streamed down Liana's face through her closed eyes.

Aaaahhh

The funeral of Duke Grantz took place.

People in mourning clothes were digging a grave in the rain, and a cleric dispatched from the Tu’an Order stood with a scripture in hand.

He recited prayers for the peace and rest of the soul, and for the purification of the spirit.

After the burial, those who had come to pay their respects lined up to throw flowers into the grave.

Without even using an umbrella, Liana stared at the scene with wide eyes.

Unable to cry, she stood in the cold winter rain. Harriet tried to cover her with an umbrella, but Liana firmly refused.

As if she wanted to punish herself.

In Liana's eyes, as she faced the rain with her bare body, swirled countless emotions.

Duke Grantz had been a powerful noble before he joined the revolutionary forces.

Many nobles, dressed in black, came to pay their respects, offered flowers, and expressed their condolences to the Duchess.

And among the visitors were the Royal Class first-year students.

“…Those demon bastards."

With eyes filled with pure rage, Ludwig, dressed in black, clenched his teeth in front of the Duke's coffin.

"I can't forgive them."

Unable to do anything but watch Ludwig's angry, retreating figure as he laid down flowers, I felt helpless.

Regardless of personal relationships, all the first-year students came to pay their respects.

Of course, Charlotte de Gardias was among them.

"…"

Not knowing whether she was aware of the situation, Charlotte didn't glance at Liana as she threw flowers and left after a moment of silent prayer. Charlotte and I briefly locked eyes, but she said nothing.

By her side for her protection was Saviolin Turner.

She didn't even offer flowers.

In this situation, there was something only I could see.

It seemed that Shanafel had completed her mission.

Otherwise, there was no reason for Charlotte to have such an expression.

And there was no reason for her gaze and expression to be so strange when looking at the drained Liana.

In a situation where there was no reason to feel guilty, there was no need for a guilt-ridden expression.

Naturally, Professor Epinhauser and Professor Mustlang came as well.

Regardless of his affiliation with the Black Order, he was fulfilling his duties as a teacher.

Seeing Liana's drained face, Professor Mustlang wiped away her tears with a handkerchief and gently hugged her.

After offering flowers, Professor Epinhauser stood before Liana.

"Whenever you need help, come find me."

“…Yes, Professor."

Liana repeated the words absentmindedly, as if she were an answering machine, seemingly without giving any thought to the words themselves.

Epinhauser, the teacher, left those words behind and our gazes met briefly.

He didn't say anything to me.

But somehow, he seemed to know that I wasn't responsible for this incident.

And then.

Bertus de Gardias had also come to the tomb to pay his respects.

"…"

With a solemn expression, Bertus threw flowers on the tomb and quietly stared at the coffin.

Next, Bertus stood in front of Liana.

Looking at the pale Liana, Bertus seemed to be pondering something.

Bertus had acted for the sake of the empire. It must have been something that only he could do.

But he had framed me, and killed Liana's father.

I couldn't say that I wasn't responsible, and Bertus wouldn't admit to his actions.

With a stern expression, Bertus, also drenched in rain, spoke a single word to Liana.

"I'm sorry, Liana."

"…"

It was an ambiguous statement.

I was the only one at the scene who could understand its ambiguity.

Liana, realizing that she was in front of the prince, clenched her teeth and took a deep breath.

"No… Thank you for coming, Bertus."

Liana was thanking someone she should never be grateful to.

I couldn't look at Bertus's face.

No matter what expression he wore, I couldn't trust myself not to throw a punch at him.

Among the numerous floral tributes, the nearly white-flower-covered coffin of Duke Grantz began to be filled with dirt.

"I'm sorry, Dad."

Winter rain ran down Liana's face.

"I'm sorry, Dad."

Her lips were so cold they had turned blue, but Liana stared straight at Duke Grantz's tomb.

"It's all my fault."

What was she so sorry for? What was she so regretful about?

In the end, Liana began to shed clear tears that couldn't be mistaken for rainwater.

"I… I messed up…"

So couldn't you come back?

I'll do better now.

I won't act crazy anymore.

I understand now.

I'll do better from now on.

Couldn't you come back?

Liana murmured while looking at the mound of dirt accumulating on the coffin.

But, of course.

Duke Grantz didn't return.

CHAPTER 370

After the funeral.

The duchess seemed to be conversing with her relatives, and we brought Liana to the annex, concerned that she might catch a cold. We had her take a bath with warm water.

We said nothing. We didn't know what to say.

Discussing why the Demon King had done such a thing was not appropriate here.

Knowing the truth, I felt a heavy burden.

The revolutionary forces had not vanished.

They had fallen into Owen's hands, and he was a sly one.

The unbelievable situation where the revolutionary forces would be used lay before us.

A faction aiming to overthrow the regime enters under its control. Could this be fair?

The situation was bitter, but one couldn't help but agree that Bertus had been extraordinarily clever.

If the revolutionary forces were mishandled at a strange time, the worst outcome could occur: the entire empire would be thrown into chaos with the revolutionary forces running rampant in exchange for eliminating their leaders.

Bertus devised a plan to annihilate the leaders of the revolutionary forces, disguising it as a demon attack.

He then arranged for Owen to become the next leader of the revolutionary forces, anticipating their confusion.

Owen would turn this incident into a matter of force used due to problems at the

negotiating table with the demons. Thus, the internal turmoil would be quelled.

In the long term, he would either gradually weaken and extinguish the revolutionary forces, incite internal strife to disintegrate them, or handle matters according to his taste.

They had been perfectly exploited.

There could hardly be a better way to bring down the revolutionary forces without significant upheaval.

The ability to utilize the name of the demon forces was not exclusive to me. The empire, which held demon prisoners, could also disguise their actions as those of the demons.

Bertus had been inspired by my act of killing Riverrier Lanze.

"Be careful."

"Mm…"

Liana descended to the annex's reception room in light attire.

Liana sat on the sofa, hugging her knees, staring blankly ahead.

For a while, none of us could speak.

No one could open their mouths.

Late at night, the silent hours passed, and everyone went to bed. In the space where, not long ago, we had gathered for a warm and lively party, only silence lingered.

Most friends couldn't leave the Grantz Ducal House's annex, feeling responsible to look after Liana.

A cold winter rain fell at night.

-Crackling! Fizzling!

Cliffman awoke to an unfamiliar sound coming from somewhere.

No, in truth, he hadn't been asleep. He was in a state of wandering between sleep and consciousness.

Cliffman rose from his bed and headed for the hallway.

He knew whose sound this was.

In the darkened annex's first-floor reception room.

-Crackling! Fizzling!

Liana, sitting blankly, repeatedly generated lightning in the empty air.

“…What are you doing?"

At Cliffman's words, Liana slowly raised her head and stared silently at the staircase where Cliffman stood.

“…Just."

Liana, with a somber expression, replied while lowering her eyes.

The confident, lively, and always playful Liana de Grantz seemed to have disappeared.

In her place was Liana with a face full of despair and frustration.

Cliffman cautiously descended the stairs.

Then, he sat down opposite Liana.

Liana looked at Cliffman and faintly smiled.

"You must be tired."

Cliffman was shocked by Liana's smile and words.

It wasn't a situation where she should be able to laugh.

It wasn't a situation where she should be able to speak kindly, yet Liana smiled in this situation.

Cliffman found this side of Liana unfamiliar.

But in such a situation, he did not know that people could actually become kinder.

There had always been someone unconditionally on her side.

She had not treated that person with care.

She thought it would last forever and took that person for granted. It was only after that person disappeared that Liana became sincere towards others.

Regretting it deeply.

She realized that no one could be forever for her and that she could not be forever for anyone.

She learned to cherish people.

"Today, I'm grateful to everyone."

That's why Liana became kind.

Regretting all the days she wasn't kind.

"…"

"In a little while, I'll feel better. Don't worry too much."

Cliffman quietly observed Liana, who seemed like a completely different person with her changed tone.

Cliffman had never been good with words.

He was clumsy at dealing with people. He had hoped that by being pushed around by this strange girl, he would improve, but he always seemed to be stuck in place. He was still awkward around people and especially so with girls.

He hadn't improved.

Cliffman didn't even know how to treat people casually, as if everything was normal.

And now, Liana wasn't her usual self. In this situation, Cliffman knew even less about what to say.

But it was strange.

Initially, he couldn't even look directly at Liana's face.

When someone stared at him, he would break into a cold sweat and hurriedly avert his gaze. Liana, in particular, had a piercing stare, and Cliffman found it unbearable. She would even scold him, asking why he kept avoiding her gaze and demanding that he look her in the eye.

He didn't know why, but when Liana looked at him, it felt like someone was squeezing his heart, causing great pain.

But now…

Cliffman looked at Liana, but she couldn't meet his gaze.

It wasn't awkward to look at her.

In this situation, he couldn't tell what to say.

He didn't even know how to act normally, let alone how to comfort someone.

However.

Not knowing didn't mean it was impossible to do.

Even if it's uncertain, one can still try.

There are things you can do to treat someone ordinarily, and things you can do to comfort them.

Whether the attempt succeeds or fails is unknown.

It was now Cliffman's turn.

"Liana."

“…Hmm?"

"Would you like to… drink?"

Liana wanted to comfort Liana de Grantz.

Liana looked at Cliffman with wide, surprised eyes, as if she hadn't expected him to say such a thing.

"…”

Drinking in this situation.

It seemed like a moment when they shouldn't drink, but Liana stared intently at Cliffman.

The boy's eyes, which were wide open to the point of being burdensome, were looking at her. Trying not to turn away, trying to do something, at least now.

Looking at the boy's eyes, which seemed to hold the greatest courage he had ever shown in his life.

"Alright, sounds good."

Liana smiled faintly.

In the middle of the night, a boy and a girl were drinking.

Strong whiskey, without any side dishes.

A girl who lost her father was drinking.

The boy who wanted to comfort the girl was also drinking. It was a night when they might get deeply drunk, but it was a night when it might be alright to do so. After all,

there were times when one would rather anesthetize themselves and let the moments pass.

There was no real conversation.

Liana looked at the window of the annex every time she sipped whiskey.

The main building was visible through the glass of the window where the winter rain flowed.

Cliffman didn't ask what she was thinking. He just sat across from her and drank slowly, matching Liana's pace.

"My father ran away to marry a commoner he met at the temple."

“…Really?"

Cliffman listened calmly to the story. He didn't stutter as usual, nor did he panic.

Liana bit her lip slightly, as if nibbling on the edge of a secretive laugh, and continued her story.

"Yeah. He was eventually caught and brought back, but if he had succeeded, I wouldn't have been born."

“…I see."

"Neither my mother nor my father ever told me what kind of person that woman was. She was just a mistake in my father's life and a similar mistake in my mother's life. I wonder if she's dead or living an ordinary life."

Liana quietly sipped her whiskey.

"After my father was caught, the family forced him to marry. They couldn't find a good match for him since they had to arrange the marriage quickly and there were rumors. So, he married my mother, a noble with no territory and only a hollow title. The second daughter of the Baron Relayon."

Everyone involved in high society knew the story, but Cliffman was not a noble. Thus, he couldn't know about the disgrace of the family Liana was talking about.

But Cliffman listened to her story quietly.

"Mother must have wanted to like Father, but Father couldn't like Mother. So naturally, Mother couldn't like Father either. Their relationship was shaky from the start."

“I was the glue that somehow kept their creaking marriage going. I don't even know how I came to be born. Anyway, I was born. It's a bit much to call me a sacrificial lamb, but whenever they had a big fight, my name would inevitably come up. For Liana's sake. For my sake. Both my mom and dad would say that. Whenever they were about to make some extreme decision, my name would always come up. So, was there anything more to do with Liana here?”

"I was sick of it."

"Did they think I was the only accomplishment they had in each other's lives?"

Liana gulps down her whiskey.

"Anyway, I hated both my mom and dad. I hated my mom for constantly interfering in my life, and I hated my dad because, although he seemed to let me be free, I could clearly see that he wanted me to live the life he couldn't. After all, if my dad had treated my mom well from the start, she wouldn't have become such a wicked person."

"Mom was obviously a problem, but dad pretended not to be a problem when in fact he was the biggest problem."

"So I hated both my mom and dad. I truly thought I hated them."

Liana pours whiskey into her glass and swirls it around.

"But, I think I liked my dad more than I thought."

Even though I thought I hated him.

Because of the regret that rushes in when he's no longer visible.

Because of the regret and guilt that come from the fact that the last words I unknowingly spoke became my final words.

"I am the worthless child you both said I was."

Liana's eyes were wide, filled with tears.

"I regret… everything…"

Putting her glass down, she couldn't drink and just stared blankly at her glass while crying. Cliffman just watched her silently.

"Why? Why did the Demon King… have to take our dad… of all places… Why did it have to be like that? Why did our dad have to die? Even though he wasn't a good husband, I think he was a good father to me. Even though he couldn't love mom, I think he did love me. I think he loved me at least, and only me. I thought of it as an excuse to rationalize their unhappy marriage. So… huh… well… and… he was a good person, my dad. He was kind to others and didn't do anything bad. He was… a good… person…"

Cliffman silently watched Liana as she sobbed.

The Duke of Grantz was a good person in public.

He wasn't a good husband or a good father, or so she thought, but he wasn't that bad a father either.

Liana says this in a world where her father has disappeared.

What has been lost cannot be regained.

In that case, there's no choice but to hope for something else.

Unable to accept why it had to be lost, she begins to think about the reasons it had to be.

And so… because… I'm a supernatural. Can I avenge? Can I fight? I wonder. How strong I am. If that's possible. I wonder…

Revenge.

Sleepless nights.

Liana vaguely imagined revenge as she played with the sparks of the campfire.

Because she's supernatural.

You can't take back the words you've said, nor can you turn back time.

But dreaming of vengeance on the Demon King who took her father might be possible.

Liana sat in a daze, alone, testing her abilities. She was supernatural, and supernatural powers were incredibly rare.

The Demon King was such a grand name.

Even the name of Duke Grantz paled in comparison before the name of the Demon King.

Hadn't it been mercilessly trampled?

Liana wondered if she could face that great name, the Demon King, on a rainy winter night.

She was a powerful supernatural who controlled electricity, but she couldn't know how strong the Demon King was.

So, in despair, regret, and vengefulness, Liana envisioned herself fighting the Demon King, fear gripping her heart.

As Cliffman watched Liana, he said quietly, "I'll help you."

“…What?"

"I'll help you. Me."

At his words, Liana stared at Cliffman, her eyes brimming with tears.

They were just two people.

Facing that great name together wouldn't change much.

"If we're together, it'll be a little less difficult."

Not that it would be easier, but a little less difficult. The words had a strange sense of realism.

A strange realism because Cliffman's sincerity felt so intense, so genuine.

It wasn't just something he said.

If you're going to risk your life in the difficult task of killing the Demon King, I'll risk mine alongside you to make it a little less difficult, he seemed to say sincerely.

"Why…?"

I can risk my life, but why should you?

To that question, Cliffman downed a full glass of whiskey in one gulp and exhaled a fiery breath.

"We're friends, aren't we?"

That was the first time the word "friends" had come from Cliffman's mouth.

At that, Liana didn't know how to react and stared at Cliffman with a flustered expression.

Liana looked at Cliffman, her face flushed, and finally managed a faint smile.

"There should be something stronger to say than that."

"…"

"But if you've come this far… you've grown a lot."

A stronger word than "friends." At that, Cliffman's face turned red.

"Thanks."

Just as Cliffman had emptied his glass of whiskey in one go, Liana drained the remaining liquor in her glass.

And then…

-Glug, glug, glug

She poured the remaining expensive whiskey from the bottle onto the ground.

Liana wiped the corner of her eye. Her eyes were red, but there were no more tears.

"I won't be able to drink for a while."

Not until the Demon King is dead.

Liana laughed weakly and said so.

The funeral was over, and we all returned to the temple.

Liana had also returned to the temple.

She had not regained her spirit.

However.

“Sigh…”

“If you're tired, take a break.”

“No. I want to do more.”

“No, rest. Forcing yourself will only hurt your body.”

“Still, a bit more…”

“I know better. Rest.”

“Huh…? Oh. Yeah… Alright. I'll rest, then.”

Liana began training at dawn.

Ellen and I watched from a distance as Liana and Cliffman ran together.

Physical strength is a condition with no disadvantages. Strictly speaking, Liana was quite lacking in physical aspects. Although she wasn't as bad as Charlotte, she couldn't compare to a close combat major who trained properly.

Liana was not particularly enthusiastic.

She had a powerful Supernatural ability that grew on its own, and that was enough for her.

Her family was wealthy, so she had no worries about her life after graduation.

She was more interested in idling around and playing, and not long ago, she was disappointed that we were living too diligently.

That Liana de Grantz was gone.

“Hah… Hah…”

“Be careful on the ice.”

“Yeah.”

Liana, her eyes filled with a fierce poison, gritted her teeth and chased after Cliffman, who she shouldn't have been able to keep up with even on tiptoes.

Liana had been the one to forcibly drag the socially awkward Cliffman around and tried to fix his personality somehow.

Now, it seemed that Cliffman no longer stammered or felt embarrassed when dealing with Liana.

Rather, it was now Cliffman who was teaching Liana something.

A common goal had erased Cliffman's embarrassment and Liana's insincerity.

Their inherent problems had vanished.

Through someone's death.

Through the purpose of vengeance.

Ellen and I watched Liana, who gritted her teeth and chased after Cliffman, even as sweat poured down her face in the dead of winter.

"I thought the Demon King would be a distant story," I said.

Ellen looked at me.

The champion of Tu'an.

And the owner of two relics.

She seemed to think it would be a story relevant to us as well.

No matter what the Demon King was, for the majority of people, he was nothing more than a symbol of terror, and it seemed unlikely that they would ever encounter him or that he would have any direct influence on their lives.

But the Duke of Grantz had died at the hands of the Demon King.

Someone nearby had experienced direct sorrow and pain due to the Demon King's actions and had changed as a result.

"Reinhardt."

"Yeah."

"I'm angry."

Ellen's eyes trembled.

Could it be that she had no choice but to acknowledge that the Demon King was truly an evil existence now? The situation was hard for her to accept.

It seemed Ellen was angry at the Demon King who had destroyed her friend's life.

Her anger would have to be different from theirs.

"Me too."

I was the one who could be the angriest.

"Let's go."

"Yeah."

We ran together.

Even if the essence of our anger and the true target of our vengeance differed.

We spent our days together.

Everyday life was spent running together until something began at the end of the day.

CHAPTER 371

Kwarung!

A dazzling flash of light incinerated the wooden stump and blasted it to smithereens.

Wooreureureung!

As the expanding air created a sharp rumbling noise, Professor Epinhauser nodded silently.

"Lightning…”

Liana calmly observed the shattered remnants of the wooden stump.

It was an outdoor training ground usually reserved for testing large-scale destruction magic.

Although it was vacation time, Professor Epinhauser was assessing Liana de Grantz's condition and abilities.

Liana de Grantz's power was to manipulate electricity.

However, it had now evolved to a level where she could summon lightning from the sky.

While it wasn't nearly as instantaneous as usual, requiring mental focus and time, Liana had undeniably summoned the lightning.

"Your ability might have evolved into a Supernatural power related to weather. We still need to analyze it further, though."

Liana could still manipulate electricity. However, her ability had undergone some changes after the death of Duke Grantz.

"Don't worry about it for now, and try to unleash your existing abilities to their fullest."

"Yes."

Professor Epinhauser stepped back to watch Liana practice her powers.

As an electric field formed around Liana's body, it began to explosively discharge into the surroundings.

Kwarurururung!

As if trying to burn everything nearby, frantic currents of electricity danced around Liana, stretching out in every direction like living entities.

At the same time that she gained the ability to summon lightning, her existing power had also become amplified.

"That's enough, you've demonstrated plenty."

"Control is… difficult."

"It will improve over time."

While the output of her ability had greatly increased, Liana had lost the finesse in handling her powers, which used to be her strong suit.

Due to the sudden and consecutive thunderclaps, Professor Epinhauser had no choice but to stop the experiment, as it was causing chaos throughout the temple and the entire royal road.

Pajik! Pajijik!

In the center of the smoke-filled training ground, Professor Epinhauser silently watched Liana absentmindedly create sparks in her right hand.

Liana slowly walked out of the training ground and stood in front of Epinhauser.

"Is this not enough?"

Without asking what was lacking, Epinhauser knew exactly what she meant.

Revenge.

There was no need to ask who the revenge was intended for.

They discussed what was sufficient.

It was excessive, not just sufficient.

The current Demon King was only considered an absolute being in the exaggerated fantasies of people.

"That's true."

However, Epinhauser was not in a position to reveal such truth.

"But your power is already highly threatening. Use it with caution."

"Yes."

In response to Epinhauser's words, Liana silently generated a current from her fingertips.

"Professor."

"Speak."

Up until now, Liana hadn't given much thought to her supernatural abilities. She had never considered living a life of combat.

"It's the first time I'm glad for my abilities."

Lightning.

A supernatural power specialized for offense, far superior to any other ability.

In speed, destructive force, and range of slaughter, it was unrivaled.

For the first time, Liana was grateful for her powers.

Epinhauser quietly observed Liana, who seemed spellbound by the blue electrical currents.

Liana's abilities had experienced exponential growth.

But to face the colossal figure known as the Demon King, she could not be satisfied with just this.

More.

A little more.

She had to become stronger.

"Can I do Magic Body Strengthening too?"

It wasn't just about relying on her abilities.

She wanted to make the raw strength of her physical body her own as well.

"It's better to specialize in your natural talents. If you focus on Magic Body Strengthening, you'll end up neglecting other areas."

"But Reinhardt did it."

Reinhardt was a precedent, a supernatural being who didn't settle for just his abilities but also do Magic Body Strengthening. Although Reinhardt was a unique case in many ways, Liana didn't care for such details.

She had to become stronger.

To do that, she had to obtain all the strength she could.

Liana felt compelled to be blindly committed to strength in order not to be crushed by the name of the Demon King.

She had started late.

Having supernatural abilities was just another starting point. While others were making efforts, Liana had been complacent with reality and had spent her time without any concern for the future.

Now, she had to put in more effort than anyone else.

Epinhauser briefly said to her.

"It's not impossible."

Liana nodded her head, satisfied with the response.

"What do you want to do?"

In my dormitory room, I was discussing with Sarkegaar.

I had been used by Bertus. And also by Owen de Gatmora. However, Bertus had said, like we had discussed long ago, that the Empire needed an enemy.

The remnants of the Demon King's forces, plotting in the shadows.

It maintained the unity of humanity. In the past, the enemy had been defined as the Darklands, but now the Empire sought unity through a new concept, terrorism.

The approach of using the Demon King's actions as a disguise to deal with troublesome matters might not be the last.

Of course, I had no intention of touching Bertus.

But the Merchant Guild Master.

The traitor of the revolutionary forces, and the one who would ultimately devour them.

I had to decide what to do about him.

"I don't like it, but it seems the royal family sees us as a necessary evil. They probably think our forces will never be fully restored. It's truly arrogant."

Sarkegaar's tone was filled with anger.

As a fallen enemy nation, the royal family treated the Demon Realm as nothing more than a mask they could use at their whim. Sarkegaar seemed to be infuriated by this.

Owen de Gatmora.

He must know that his life is in danger. Even if we cannot touch the prince, it wouldn't be difficult for us to eliminate him.

The moment he decided to use us, Owen had essentially put his own neck on the line.

If we kill Owen de Gatmora, we can prevent the royal family from swallowing the revolutionary forces.

However, if the revolutionaries, plunged into chaos, then start to riot, that's not what I want.

Sarkegaar might prefer chaos.

Simply removing and controlling the leaders of the revolutionary forces is not Bertus's entire strategy.

I had a strong conviction that my response to Owen's death was also within the scope of Bertus's strategy.

To kill or to spare Owen de Gatmora.

It was clear that Bertus intended to gauge the disposition of the remaining demonic forces through which of the two decisions we made.

In the case of Riverrier Lanze, the royal family still had not gained certainty about my true intentions for killing Riverrier Lanze.

The empire would still be confused, not knowing what intentions had caused that incident, which had yielded excessively favorable results for them.

If I kill Owen de Gatmora and sabotage the proper consolidation of the revolutionary forces, the royal family will make a judgment about the remaining demonic forces. That the case of Riverrier Lanze was a mere coincidence, and the goal of the demonic forces was to overthrow the empire.

If I don't kill Owen de Gatmora, the royal family will reserve their conclusion.

Leaving the revolutionary forces, who have lost any chance of joining hands with

them, untouched wouldn't be helpful if they assumed the intention of the demonic forces was to rebuild the demon world.

By sparing Owen, we could imply that we are not a group focused on causing chaos within the empire but have other hidden intentions. However, that could simultaneously raise suspicions about why we initially tried to join hands with the revolutionary forces.

"We cannot give our enemies certainty about our nature."

There's no reason to inform the royal family about what we are pursuing. The moment we decide to take Owen's life, the royal family's attitude toward us will be determined.

Bertus wants to use us. While our existence must be acknowledged by those who should be our enemies, there's no reason for us to make them certain that we are their enemies.

"Distasteful as it may be, we'll spare Owen de Gatmora. It wouldn't hurt to have some kind of connection with the royal family, accessible from the perspective of the demonic forces."

"Yes, Your Highness."

Sarkegaar nodded, as if convinced.

I cannot obsess over saving or taking someone's life based on personal feelings.

Such thoughts only serve to acknowledge that I have become someone who hangs another's life in the balance without a care. This realization suddenly weighed on me.

"How did they react?"

“Upon hearing that his name would be borrowed, he showed signs of displeasure, but he did not harm me.”

Bertus was quietly observing Owen de Gatmora, who sat on the sofa in his office,

savoring his tea.

"I never thought you'd come back alive. Quite unexpected."

"I thought the same, Your Highness."

Owen de Gatmora.

One of the leaders of the revolutionary faction and a traitor. He was now poised to engulf the decapitated revolutionary faction. And slowly, he would wield the group disguised as a revolution and eventually sink them.

Although he was a traitor, he too had returned alive from a place where his life was in danger.

The greatest contributor to this operation was Owen de Gatmora.

Although Bertus had given the order, Owen had devised the plan, manipulated the letters, and skillfully controlled the messages to bring everyone together.

In reality.

In the revolutionary faction's leadership, there were more opposing opinions about joining hands with the demonic forces.

However, Owen had made everyone believe that the majority of the leadership had already agreed to cooperate with the demonic forces by manipulating the letters and messages.

Bertus had many thoughts.

What on earth did those people want?

When he heard that they had contacted Owen and wanted to join hands, he thought their goal might be to overthrow the empire.

However, now that their plan had been thwarted, they had quietly backed down at a moment when they should have at least spat on the ruined situation.

They joined hands with the revolutionary faction because their goal was to

overthrow the empire.

In that case, they should have killed Owen. At least, a ruined plan should have caused chaos.

But Owen de Gatmora returned safely. Had they known about the contingency plan for absorbing the revolutionary faction after Owen's death?

No, Bertus was certain that the probability was very low. If they had known that Owen was a traitor, they would have had no reason to contact him in the first place.

"I don't know what the hell they want."

Chaos or stability? If stability, why on earth would they want stability for their enemies?

Bertus had solved a big problem but felt like he had fallen into an even bigger labyrinth.

"By the way, tell me now."

"What do you mean, Your Highness?"

Owen smiled faintly at Bertus's words.

"Why did you betray them?"

Owen was not a spy that Bertus had planted from the beginning. After the Rotary Club incident, he suddenly appeared and divulged everything.

Owen looked at his teacup with narrowed eyes.

"The merchant had a dream."

"A dream…"

"Yes, it took quite a long time to realize that the dream would not come true, but once I knew it was a dream, I tried to wake up."

"It seems you were quite serious about the revolution."

"Is there any doubt?"

Owen had dreamed of revolution earnestly. In front of the greatest beneficiary of the caste system, he calmly admitted that he had sincerely denied it.

He was an old man who had risked his life to meet with the remnants of the demonic forces alone. Thus, in front of Bertus, he could not help but be audacious in his own way.

The old merchant dreamed of a world where everyone was equal. He was serious about it.

"What's the point of talking about what's already gone? They seem to be more obsessed with discussing what a revolution is, rather than dreaming of the revolution itself. And within that, based on whether one is from the Orbis class or not, and to what extent the internal logic of the revolution has been developed, the hierarchy is divided and the way they are treated differs… I realized something else."

"Something else?"

"Yes, that's just how humans are, by nature."

Human nature is discrimination and distinction.

Owen realized that even those who dreamed of equality tried to distinguish each other based on their background.

"In a new world, people will still be distinguished and try to distinguish, and among those distinguished, someone will be considered noble, special, and others will be despised and scorned. If that's human nature, if the distinctions don't disappear but only the indicators change, then why do we need a new world?"

The old merchant realized too late that there is no reason to destroy the existing stable distinctions if we can't get rid of distinctions themselves, and no reason to spill blood while replacing one distinction with another.

Bertus quietly watched Owen de Gatmora as he spoke.

He had dreamed of a revolution, but after a long time experiencing the revolution organization, he knew that it didn't remove discrimination and distinction, but only

created new ones.

That's why he decided that there was no good in such a revolution, and he sought out Bertus.

He didn't try to replace the pyramid, but met the person at the top of the pyramid now.

Bertus gave Owen de Gatmora a sarcastic smile.

"Your words sound reasonable, but isn't it just resentment or betrayal born from the fact that you, not being from the Orbis class, couldn't become part of the leadership?"

He had been loyal to the organization like a dog, but he couldn't become part of the leadership because he wasn't part of the Orbis class graduate faction.

Owen de Gatmora laughed at Bertus's malicious words, which asked if it wasn't simply resentment because he had to be satisfied with being an executive.

"Ha, is that all? There was also the reason that I was a lowly man who only cared about money, and the reason that I wasn't a noble, Your Highness."

"Ha, haha! Ha, ha. Ha. Hahaha!"

Bertus couldn't help but burst into laughter at Owen de Gatmora's tragicomic and bitter joke.

The very reason Owen couldn't become part of the leadership in the revolutionary organization demonstrated just how contradictory the group was.

Bertus laughed for a while, then wiped the corners of his eyes with a handkerchief and chuckled.

"Alright, anyway, you did well this time. I'll call you again when there's work."

"Please call me anytime, Your Highness."

Bertus quietly watched Owen as he respectfully took his leave.

He dreamed a dream, and he knew that it was a misguided dream.

So, was Owen de Gatmora a betrayer or a resolute man, who pushed all those who shared the futile dream with him into the abyss of hell?

Owen de Gatmora had dreamed a dangerous dream, but he abandoned it earlier than others, and in exchange for betraying those who had once shared the dream with him, he obtained absolution.

Bertus had no interest in such matters.

All he did was watch the old merchant's back, which wasn't so straight anymore.

CHAPTER 372

Liana had changed.

It was inevitable, given the circumstances. Liana had been someone who wasted time aimlessly, but she was also an incredibly powerful Supernatural who grew stronger on her own.

She had power but had never really thought about using it in her daily life. However, in the face of her current situation, Liana was grateful for the strength she had accumulated during her seemingly wasted time and was sincerely working hard to hone her abilities.

In addition to training her Supernatural powers, she was also focusing on physical training, something she had always despised and avoided. In this regard, Cliff was the one helping her.

Ultimately, it was not within my power to stop Liana from seeking revenge on her enemies.

So, who should be the true target of Liana's vengeance?

Owen de Gatmora, who had secretly conspired within the revolutionary forces and betrayed them at the critical moment?

Shanafel and Saviolin Turner, who were likely to have executed the operation?

Bertus, the mastermind behind it all?

Or the Emperor who endorsed the plan?

Or, after all this, was it me, who had set off the chain of events that led to this entire situation?

I didn't know which direction Liana's vengeful blade should truly point.

It seemed unfair if I were the one to bear the brunt of it, but when I thought about it

carefully, perhaps it wasn't so unfair after all. It was a thought mixed with resignation.

Liana pursued strength.

More than anyone among us, she desired and longed for it fervently.

Thus, the remaining days of the winter break passed by.

And I had to truly prepare.

Prepare to become everyone's enemy.

That moment was fast approaching.

[Achievement Points: 17,730]

Up until now, I hadn't needed to use them for anything in particular, and I had been saving them like emergency funds, just in case something significant happened. The most recent use of my points was to enhance my word magic ability to create a significant opening for Riverrier Lanze during the incident.

By strengthening my word magic, I restrained his movements and stabbed the Tiamata, which had transformed into a demon sword, into his heart. Since then, I had become the true master of Tiamata, and it could freely transform into a holy sword or a demon sword according to my will.

Achievement points had always been a powerful weapon for me, as they could create significant variables.

There were quite a few things I could do with the remaining achievement points.

With 8,000 points, I could unlock my fourth talent.

My current talents were self-suggestion, Word Magic, and magic control.

[Swordsmanship - 8,000 points]

To become a master class, I needed a talent related to combat, but my self-suggestion talent already functioned in that regard. However, acquiring a talent in swordsmanship wouldn't be a bad idea.

Gaining swordsmanship would speed up my journey to the master class.

Upon using 8,000 achievement points, I would be left with 9,000 points. To awaken my fifth talent, I would need 16,000 points, so I would require an additional 7,000 points to awaken it.

However, I am currently torn between two talents.

[Swordsmanship - 8,000 points]

[Supernatural Resistance - 8,000 points]

I might need resistance against Supernatural powers.

With my sacred spirit, I am virtually immune to mental magic, and while I will need anti-magic resistance, that can be trained.

However, Supernatural powers are impossible to resist.

If my true identity is discovered, countless people will become my enemies.

This would likely include Liana de Grantz. Her electric powers have become significantly more potent through her awakening.

Of course, Liana's resistance can be somewhat managed with the defensive abilities that arise from my Magic Body Strengthening. However, with Supernatural resistance, I could be relatively safe from not only Liana but also other existing Supernaturals.

And the real problem is not Liana.

Scarlett.

Scarlet's immunity power completely neutralizes me. In the face of her power, which nullifies Supernatural powers within a range, I can't use self-suggestion or word magic.

People have already seen Scarlett's power neutralize me during the tournament. If my identity as the Demon King is revealed and a fight ensues, my truly dangerous enemy will not be Ellen but Scarlett.

If Scarlett's immunity power is classified as Supernatural, can I counter it with Supernatural resistance?

Even if it's not, I can make it possible.

[Additional Setting]

Though I have never used it, I can add a setting that allows me to resist Scarlett's immunity power with Supernatural resistance.

However, in this case, there's a drawback of having to spend a considerable amount of achievement points to deal with only Scarlet. It's not like I absolutely have to fight Scarlet. In this case, it would be a waste of points.

Achievement points are saved to be used when needed, not to be rendered useless.

Should I secure a talent related to martial arts to reach the Master Class more quickly?

Or should I acquire Supernatural resistance to pursue more stability?

My contemplation did not last long.

[I will use 8,000 achievement points.]

[I have acquired the talent 'Swordsmanship.']

As long as it's not urgent, I will pursue versatility.

My talents now include Swordsmanship, Magic Control, Self-suggestion, and Word Magic.

I have met the optimal conditions to become a Master Class.

The remaining achievement points are 9,730.

I would like to keep this amount as a reserve for emergencies.

[Supernatural Resistance - 16,000 points]

I would have liked to have Supernatural resistance as a talent in case of unforeseen situations.

I had been holding back, thinking that having too many talents might raise suspicion.

Maybe Supernatural resistance was the better choice…?

Once consumed, a talent cannot be returned.

Having spent a large portion of my achievement points, it's now time to accumulate them again.

I wasn't sure if it was the right time for this, but in the end, achievement points were more important to me than money.

Achievement points were the only ability that could interfere with the world. And at this moment, the only way to obtain achievement points was through challenges.

Of course, the challenge list was updated periodically.

[Challenge List]

[Discover the true identity of Akasha - 50,000 points]

[Find Cantus Magna - 30,000 points]

The top two challenges coincided with my goals. These would not disappear anytime soon.

At first, absurd challenges like slapping the emperor dominated the top of the list, but now, more serious challenges offered substantial achievement point rewards.

It seemed that it was no longer a time for jokes.

Or so I thought.

[Come out to classmates (Cross-dressing contest) - 5,000 points]

[Date with Bertus while cross-dressing - 4,000 points]

[Date with Kono Lint while cross-dressing - 4,000 points]

[Date with someone while cross-dressing - 2,000 points]

[Cross-dressing……]

[Cross-dressing! - 500 points]

"…"

Well, that was unexpected.

Were they going to milk this until I died?

I decided to forget about achievement points for a while.

Ever since my eyes had been blinded by achievement points and I had participated in the cross-dressing contest, I had no intention of doing anything else with them. The snowball effect of embarrassment was too much.

I couldn't rule out the possibility of more problems arising, and they already had.

Just because I had acquired swordsmanship talent didn't mean my sword skills had miraculously improved. Up until now, I had mostly relied on my existing specs.

An absolute difference in skill.

Purely in terms of swordsmanship, I was inferior to Cliffman, Scarlett, and Ludwig. Ellen didn't even need to be mentioned. I was still lagging even with all my efforts.

The reason I could gain an advantage over them was due to my self-suggestion and the ability to use Magic Body Strengthening.

So my style was to push through the difference in skill with overwhelming physical

strength.

But now that I had acquired swordsmanship talent, I was granted a future where I could excel in pure skill itself.

In the end, I focused on training amidst a situation where gradual change was happening a little faster than dramatic change.

One day, Ellen, Cliffman, and I were gathered closely in the training grounds.

“…You think I'm too weak?"

"Yeah."

Cliffman had come to Ellen and me with a serious expression, asking for advice.

"I did say I'd help, but… as you can see, it's difficult to say this, but… Liana's Supernatural abilities were already strong…”

"And now they're even stronger."

"Exactly."

Liana's Supernatural abilities had become extremely powerful after an unwanted awakening, and they were growing stronger. The trigger was the death of her father and her anger and regret, but as a result, Liana had indeed become stronger.

And Cliffman wanted to help Liana in her quest for revenge.

Nevertheless.

"I'm afraid that if such a battle really happened, I wouldn't be of any help…”

Cliffman thought of himself as useless.

How come he…

Why can't he escape this kind of pathetic state?

If you think about whether Cliffman is strong or not in a general sense, he belongs to

the monster category.

However.

The ones he's seeking advice from are Ellen and me.

There's no need to mention Ellen, and I've already gone beyond the path of normalcy, transcending even the monster's orbit.

In other words.

If there are beings like divine beings among the royal class of monsters, it would be Ellen and me. Although this is said in terms of growth rate rather than actual strength.

Moreover, the one who had vowed to fight alongside us was originally an incredibly powerful Supernatural, but his abilities suddenly exploded in growth this time.

So, Cliffman, who is not divine but could be considered heavenly, feels that his bowl seems infinitely small because the comparison is overwhelmingly strong.

"Shouldn't I be able to do Magic Body Strengthening as well…"

No, this is.

You're not supposed to realize that in the first year. Ellen couldn't do it in her first year either. The situation was just bizarre, and she awakened too early. In fact, she had a nosebleed, and I fainted for a few days, right?

But it's just that the grass looks greener on the other side, and he has reached a level where he thinks he's a sparrow when he's actually a swan.

It's clear that he fell into the imagination that when Liana really has to fight, he might be a hindrance and should just sulk. And if a fight happens right now, there's a high probability that it would happen.

As always, Ellen looked at Cliffman indifferently.

"Don't think too hastily. There's no need to be in such a hurry."

And calmly consoling him is one of Ellen's strengths.

"We never know what will happen. The Demon King might attack the temple anytime, thinking it could threaten them now or later."

Um…

If the Demon King really wants the destruction of mankind and desires a demonic war, that could happen.

But I'm telling you, it's not me!

I'm here with you guys!

Is this what it feels like when you say you're about to explode?

“…You're right."

The problem was that it sounded credible.

The recent demonic attack disguised as an incident has led to various misunderstandings about demonic forces.

Not only the powerful demons that have been operating so far, but people also came to believe that orcs, ogres, and other demonic creatures exist under the command of the Demon King.

People's imaginations added that they already had a considerable military force.

There are questions about why the demons attacked that place, but as Bertus intended, people were engulfed in fear of demons. Not many questioned the true reason.

To be precise, people understood that the intention was to attack the capital Rajeurn of the small country Levaina, but the merchant guild branch on the outskirts was unfortunately attacked instead.

Soon.

The fear of not knowing when and where the touch of the Demon King might reach

lay dormant in everyone's hearts, and this was no exception for Clifman.

And.

The temple where the talents who could be called the future of the empire slept was, in the minds of humans, the highest priority for an attack.

Even among those, the royal class.

It was the first place to suppress in order to shatter the empire's future, which the Demon King dreamt of dominating.

Clifman's anxiety about still being too weak in the face of an unknown danger held persuasive power regardless of my actual intentions.

To be precise, he was too weak compared to Liana.

"So, I'm thinking of focusing on magic sensitivity training for now. Could you help me with that?"

"We've already done that."

“…It just didn't have any effect."

"Still…”

It seemed Clifman had determined that if he couldn't succeed in Magic Body Strengthening, he couldn't even begin.

However, Ellen and I had been teaching Clifman how to do Magic Body Strengthening at every opportunity.

I had somehow managed to awaken my abilities, but Clifman was still at a standstill.

It wasn't a training he had done before, so how could he miraculously awaken his ability of Magic Body Strengthening by focusing on it? Such a thing was impossible.

"I understand what you're thinking, but among the first-year students, only Liana and I can do Magic Body Strengthening. And it's awkward to say this, but we're the unusual ones. There are even seniors who still haven't grasped it. If you rush too

much, you might even destroy your magic circuit, causing more severe aftereffects…”

"There's one more person now."

Clifman cut me off in the middle of my sentence.

"What do you mean, one more person?"

"A person who can do Magic Body Strengthening."

Clifman pointed somewhere.

It was unmistakably in the direction of the Class B dormitory.

"Ludwig."

What?

The protagonist, this bastard.

When did he pull a fast one without me knowing?

CHAPTER 373

In this world, there are two exceptions that defy the standard norms: the Talent Vending Machine Ellen and me, the one who cheats.

But I was mistaken; there are actually three.

The protagonist, Ludwig, must also be included.

"…"

"…"

Ellen and I, along with Cliffman, were silently watching Ludwig, who was sleeping peacefully in the rest area behind the duty priest's office.

I knew this feeling.

He was asleep due to the aftereffects of his Magic Body Strengthening.

"Ah, hello. You're here."

Next to Ludwig, Delfin, who had been nursing him, nodded his head as he saw us.

Whether the yoga master, who was practically a healer in this situation, had already visited or not, Ludwig's condition seemed to be fine.

Or maybe someone who wasn't the yoga master but could undoubtedly perform something similar.

Saviolin Turner was also sitting by Ludwig's side.

"Last night, during the match, Ludwig used Magic Body Strengthening."

She said briefly.

Cliffman had his own reasons for requesting counseling from us today.

He knew he was too impulsive, and he had accepted the fact that Ellen and I were exceptions among exceptions.

However, since Ludwig had also enhanced his power with Magic Body Strengthening starting from yesterday, he began to wonder if he really had a problem and requested counseling.

"Muttering about not having enough time and that it shouldn't go on like this, he suddenly used Magic Body Strengthening, so I couldn't help but be… surprised."

Ludwig had definitely said at the Duke of Grantz's funeral that he couldn't forgive the demon bastards.

It was clear that he was extremely angry.

Feeling rage that a classmate's parent had been murdered by the Demon King, he had come to think that the battle against the Demon King was not a distant future problem but one that could happen at any moment.

So, the urgency in his heart created a strong desire for power, and the world responded by granting Ludwig a new path, Magic Body Strengthening.

Saviolin Turner seemed to have been greatly shocked by witnessing the scene firsthand. She had only heard about Ellen and me, who had used Magic Body Strengthening on our own, but she had actually seen it happen with Ludwig.

Witnessing the unyielding and endlessly striving person finally surpassing a stage, she must have been secretly admiring him.

And as for Cliffman,

With Ludwig managing to enhance his power on his own, it's no wonder he'd doubt whether he was lacking if he couldn't do it himself.

"Uhm……”

"Is, is he waking up?"

As Ludwig moaned and tossed about, Delfin checked his complexion from various angles.

No.

Stay in bed for a few more days!

Waking up in just one day would hurt my pride!

"Ugh… Mm."

Fortunately, he didn't wake up in just one day, unknowingly provoking my self-consciousness.

Sleep a bit more.

Since he's the protagonist, I'll allow him to wake up one day earlier than me.

Ah.

I have these thoughts, too.

It's no wonder that Cliffman is now completely devoid of pride and feeling down.

Ellen and I stared blankly at the unconscious Ludwig, who seemed fine but just couldn't wake up, and our gazes naturally shifted toward Cliffman.

It felt as if Ellen and I had become like twins.

I'm useless.

I'm worthless.

I'm pathetic.

Help?

Someone like me?

I'm a hindrance.

A piece of trash that can't even do Magic Body Strengthening.

I'm trash.

Trash should die.

"…"

"…"

Seeing his expression, which was filled with more than just pessimism and self-loathing, bordering on self-abuse, made me feel unbearable.

"Let's try to do something," Ellen said calmly.

And then.

[Event Triggered - Magic Body Strengthening (Cliffman)]

[Description: Help Cliffman awaken his Magic Body Strengthening.]

[Reward: 2,000 Achievement Points, Increased Sensitivity to Magic Body Strengthening]

The event had occurred.

Achievement points.

I had used a large amount of them recently, so this was probably an opportunity to accumulate more.

Achievement points are always the last bastion, after all.

In addition, the increased sensitivity to Magic Body Strengthening might be even more important. It's crucial to become proficient in Magic Body Strengthening and eventually reach the master class.

"Yeah, there's nothing you can't do," Ellen and I had no choice but to change our attitude.

"…Yeah."

We had to encourage him like this, or else who knows what would happen!

Of course, Delfin and Saviolin Turner couldn't grasp what we were talking about in front of the unconscious Ludwig.

In the end.

The three of us didn't worry about Ludwig's unconscious state at all, and we only realized we were just as trashy as him when we returned to the training grounds.

Cliffman urgently needed Magic Body Strengthening.

However, trying to grasp Magic Body Strengthening while not having a clue was like a blind man touching an elephant; no matter how hard he tried, it would only lead to failure.

So, in the end, Ellen and I spent hours beside the struggling Cliffman, offering various suggestions.

As a result, Cliffman failed to get a feel for it, and we ended up with a bizarre scene where Ellen and I bickered endlessly.

"No, you have to do it by sensing the essence within your body."

"Essence? Can you even explain what essence is?"

"Magic and essence are basically the same thing."

"Are they? That might work for you, but for the rest of us, we need a clear and systematic explanation. If you explain something vague with even vaguer words, how can he possibly grasp it?"

"Can you give a systematic explanation?"

"No, not at all."

“…Why are you so confident?"

"It's not my job. You're the genius who should be explaining it properly."

"Teaching is different from doing it yourself."

"No. You're good at teaching too. You're good at everything, so you should be good at teaching as well. The problem is that you're not trying. Just try to teach well."

"I can't do everything either."

"No, you'll do well if you just try, right? Use your head a bit to teach well. Why don't you use that good brain of yours? Are you dense?"

“…I'm not dense."

Oh, dear.

I hit the mark with that one.

"Huh? Then who's dense, if not you?"

Ellen's face paled at my words.

"No, that's not what I meant…”

"So, you're saying you're not the dense one."

"No, I didn't think that. I just meant that I'm not dense."

"Really? Then who is dense? Tell me."

"I won't. I don't even think like that."

"Who did you think was dense, if not me? Tell me your true feelings! Tell me your innermost thoughts!"

Swoosh!

I held my breath as Ellen seemed genuinely annoyed.

"I'm the dense one."

"You know it well."

If I had pushed her any further, I would have gotten a taste of her anger.

Anyway, our conversation had veered off into unrelated matters from magical Magic Body Strengthening.

"Guys, guys… I feel like blood is going to come out of my ears, not my mouth…"

If there was a problem with Magic Body Strengthening, we needed to perform bloodletting, but we kept quiet, staring at Cliffman as he claimed it felt like blood would come out of his ears.

Naturally.

Nothing in particular happened.

Ellen's words that teaching and doing are different were true.

Neither Ellen nor I had any particular talent for teaching, and Magic Body Strengthening was especially difficult to teach, so there could be no progress.

From the beginning, it would be strange if Magic Body Strengthening happened just by nagging like this.

Thus, we returned to training since Magic Body Strengthening was making no progress.

I'm not sure if this was a case of old habits die hard, but at least it gave me the awareness that I was doing something.

-Whoosh!

"Ouch!"

Cliffman, who was struck by my practice sword, fell back with a thud.

"Haah… Haah…"

The guy struggled to his feet, bruised and battered.

"I know it's not my place to say, but excessive punishment doesn't necessarily lead to improvement."

Watching Cliffman struggle to his feet, he nodded at my words.

"Even so, I have to do it."

"…"

Magic Body Strengthening eluded us, so we had no choice but to continue sparring.

If I were to use Magic Body Strengthening, Cliffman would have no chance against me.

Thanks to what I had learned from Ellen, my swordsmanship had improved significantly, and I had even awakened my ability of magic mastery.

Cliffman couldn't face me, who could use extremely stable Magic Body Strengthening. To be precise, even without Magic Body Strengthening, I could now face Cliffman with just self-suggestion.

Unless I sealed off a few of my abilities, like removing pieces in a game of chess, Cliffman could no longer compete with me.

In a pure swordsmanship contest, I would win.

But such purity doesn't apply in a real fight.

If I had faced Riverrier Lanze alone, I would have died a hundred times over in a hundred fights.

Yet, Riverrier Lanze died at my hands.

That's what battle is.

One can attack and be attacked.

The side that meets death is the loser, and the side that survives is the winner; it's a

simple binary. The definition of a battle exists solely in victory.

I didn't tell such stories.

Rather, it was Cliffman who wanted it.

He wanted me to give it my all.

If I didn't, it would be meaningless, he said.

Cliffman decided to help Liana with her revenge to kill the Demon King. However, he himself lacked the necessary abilities and sought to at least meet the minimum condition of Magic Body Strengthening.

Liana was already a very powerful Supernatural before her sudden surge in power. Her abilities had naturally increased to the point where they couldn't be compared to when she was on the uninhabited island.

Even after awakening his Magic Body Strengthening, Cliffman would need to train for a while longer to be of any help to Liana.

Of course, what would become of Cliffman and Liana once they entered the actual battle remained to be seen.

Just like Liana worked out to recover her weakened physical strength.

Cliffman, who taught Liana how to exercise, also longed for the next step. He knew that he could help Liana, but he could not provide any real assistance.

Like Ellen.

Like me.

Like Ludwig.

He sought to step onto the next level called Magic Body Strengthening.

He wanted to become the exception that was not the exception.

"I'll go."

The situation seemed bleak.

-clang! Clang! Clang! Clack!

-bang!

"Ah!"

I looked at Cliffman, who dropped his sword and struggled to get up.

It was pitiful and wretched, and while they were doing this for reasons unknown to them.

In the end, I was helping someone train to kill me.

At least I shouldn't be the one to help him.

Ellen is prepared to face the Demon King.

However, Cliffman and Liana have a clear goal of killing the Demon King.

I'm not sure how deep Liana's desire for revenge is, but Cliffman's intention to help her cannot be underestimated.

Just like Ellen said she could die for me.

Cliffman could also entertain such thoughts.

He couldn't reach Magic Body Strengthening, so he collided body with body.

Cliffman kept falling and getting back up as if he were possessed by some evil.

As if doing so would make a difference.

Because I did it.

Because a guy named Ludwig did it too.

As if believing he could do it too.

As if believing that something could be achieved as long as he didn't fall.

I silently watched Cliffman, who struggled to get up with his trembling legs, exhausted.

"You won't achieve anything like that."

And then, Ellen, who had been watching by his side, restrained him.

Cliffman, now deterred even by the observing Ellen, hung his practice sword back on the rack.

"I'll be back after visiting the duty priest's office."

"…"

If exhaustion is the problem, then he needs to regain his unexhausted state.

According to Adriana, this kind of training was not the best. To put it bluntly, it was like a drug-fueled run.

However, everyone believed that the threat of the Demon King could invade their daily lives at any moment, so they couldn't afford to take their time to grow stronger.

Cliffman, having received healing from a priest, appeared to be in good condition.

The Magic Body Strengthening was truly inscrutable.

All he could do was clash swords against swords.

His desperate expression seemed to say he believed they could reach somewhere in the end, but it was more like there was nothing else he could do.

Cliffman was not weak by any means, nor did he lack talent.

It was just that his comparisons were so overwhelming that he felt more pathetic in comparison to others.

"You shouldn't do that."

"It's fine."

Cliffman stared at me calmly.

Ellen silently watched my duel with Cliffman.

-Clang! Clank! Cluck!

-Thud!

"Ugh!"

Ellen quietly watched Cliffman rolling on the ground.

How many hours had it been, and how many times? They couldn't count.

He was no match for them.

Reinhardt could enhance his combat abilities in two stages.

Once through self-suggestion, and twice through Magic Body Strengthening.

Ellen didn't know much about it, but with Tiamata, a third stage of enhancement was possible.

Ellen also noticed that Reinhardt's Magic Body Strengthening was far more stable than before.

Even though he had been using Magic Body Strengthening continuously, it was maintained at a level not much different from when they had just started the duel. It felt as if the proficiency of Magic Body Strengthening had suddenly jumped up. Even after Ludwig received healing from a priest several times over a few hours, Reinhardt did not seek out a priest.

As for Reinhardt, Ellen did not find it strange that he had become stronger by leaps and bounds, doing such bizarre things without a care.

However.

Cliffman was not Reinhardt.

Self-suggestion, a strange supernatural power, could be seen as the source of Reinhardt's strength.

Cliffman did not possess such a thing.

So, even if he wished to become as strong as Reinhardt, it would not be possible.

If sheer willpower could make everyone strong, the world would be filled with Swordmasters, Archmages, and Supernaturals.

Watching Cliffman charge repeatedly, Ellen felt a strange sense of deja vu.

Reinhardt, who held his ground like an iron wall and overpowered Cliffman time and time again.

Cliffman, who kept getting back up and standing before Reinhardt after being knocked down.

In Cliffman's figure, Ellen saw Reinhardt, and in Reinhardt's figure, she saw herself.

Reinhardt, who had always been the one to fall, now stood like an iron wall before someone else.

Ellen could no longer deny it.

-Clang!

"Argh!"

Reinhardt was strong.

In fact, Cliffman had always been the one to bring Reinhardt to his knees in the past. At some point, the balance of power had reversed, and it seemed as if it could never be overturned again.

Ludwig felt a strange sense of inferiority towards Reinhardt more than anything else.

The core of the inferiority that Cliffman felt was not Ludwig, who had suddenly

awakened to Magic Body Strengthening yesterday, but Reinhardt.

Ludwig, at least in the B-class, had been watching Reinhardt's growth from afar.

But Cliffman had been watching up close.

Crossing swords directly, Cliffman had always been overwhelmingly victorious until, at some point, he could no longer win.

From being a level where Reinhardt had to hold back a move for them to be evenly matched, to now where Reinhardt had to hold back two moves, and soon perhaps even three moves.

Cliffman was not lazy. He had always worked hard.

Both had worked hard, but only Reinhardt had become stronger at a rapid pace. Of course, Cliffman had also become stronger, but Reinhardt's speed was too fast.

Cliffman had to watch the runner who started far behind him now disappear into the distance, always from the sidelines.

Still, it was a good thing that Cliffman did not express his inferiority with malice or hatred.

But, there was no way that the feeling of inferiority could cease to exist.

-Clang!

"Ugh!"

Cliffman, who once made others fall, now found himself falling, being knocked down, pushed away, and suppressed by the opponent he used to play with, yet still, he managed to rise again.

"Haah… Haah…”

Reinhardt knew what Cliffman's inner feelings were like, so he could never be at ease.

At least to Ellen's eyes, it seemed that way. But Reinhardt did not show any signs of

pity towards Cliffman.

After all, pity would be the last thing Cliffman would want to receive now.

For someone who tries to move forward, receiving a look of pity from someone ahead implies that they will never be able to advance.

At least, Reinhardt did not pity Cliffman.

In response to the request to give his all, he was merely facing Cliffman with his full strength.

Still, in the end.

Cliffman could not stand up to Reinhardt now.

Just as Ellen was an insurmountable wall for Reinhardt, Reinhardt had also become an insurmountable wall for someone else.

For Ludwig, who had just awakened to Magic Body Strengthening, and Cliffman, who still couldn't do even that.

Having become such a wall, Reinhardt stood there, showing no signs of fatigue, looking down at his fallen opponent.

CHAPTER 374

Reinhardt had grown stronger in his own way.

He had become stronger by confronting challenges and taking risks.

That was Reinhardt's way.

But this approach might not work for Cliffman.

However, Ellen wondered if it really wouldn't work.

She thought about Cliffman's talent in 'battle.'

It was a very broad talent, encompassing everything related to battle.

A talent for achieving victory in combat.

It included proficiency with any weapon.

However, Cliffman continued to crumble before Reinhardt.

What was Cliffman's true talent?

Swish!

Reinhardt's practice sword shattered when it clashed with Cliffman's.

Yet, it was Reinhardt, whose sword had broken, who evaded Cliffman's sword while pulling his body back, and then grabbed Cliffman by the collar and threw him down.

Thud!

“Ugh!”

Even with his sword broken, Reinhardt's reaction speed was faster.

As Cliffman staggered to his feet, Ellen addressed the pair.

"Stop."

"Alright, take a break now. Today isn't the day…"

"No, I can do more…"

At Cliffman's insistence, Ellen glared at him.

"You won't improve this way."

Ellen swept up the shattered pieces of the practice sword with a broom and put them away. Then, she snatched the practice sword from Cliffman's hand and hung it on the rack.

"You have to try a different approach."

"A different approach…?"

Ellen looked at Reinhardt.

"Reinhardt."

"…Huh?"

Reinhardt didn't know what Ellen was thinking.

"Can you bring that older girl here?"

"What? Olivia, the senior?"

"Yes."

"Why her all of a sudden?"

"I think she could help."

Olivia's assistance.

Reinhardt hesitated for a moment before nodding.

"Alright, I'll ask her."

Cliffman's eyes widened in surprise, while Ellen leaned against the window of the training hall, arms crossed, waiting for Olivia to arrive.

How long did they wait?

Creak

“…Why did you call me?"

Olivia Lanze had reluctantly come at Reinhardt's request, but her demeanor expressed clear displeasure. However, Ellen didn't seem hostile.

Ellen knew.

Ever since they shared that secret, Olivia's hostility felt like a mask.

It wasn't as strong as it seemed.

Knowing that neither could pose a significant threat or harbor ill will, they had no choice but to grudgingly acknowledge each other.

"We need your help."

"What? My help?"

Olivia's brows furrowed, clearly annoyed by the request.

"Why should I help you?"

"I'm not the one who needs help; it's him."

Ellen pointed at Cliffman.

Cliffman's expression changed when Olivia Lanze, a fifth-year student with a notorious reputation but no real familiarity, stared at him.

Although he had developed a certain level of immunity in various aspects, it was still difficult for Cliffman to deal with people he was not familiar with.

Ellen went to the center of the training hall and looked at Cliffman without her practice sword.

Grumble!

Ellen, who had Magic Body Strengthening, stared at Cliffman with eyes full of mysterious energy.

"If you think I'll kill him with my skills, you'll be able to stop me before that, right?"

"Uh… What?"

Since her words were honestly acknowledging that her skills were far superior to her, Olivia was taken aback.

"Can you do it or not?"

"I guess I can… but why do I have to do that all of a sudden? Why me?"

"Ah."

Then, Reinhardt exclaimed as if he had realized something.

Cliffman, not understanding the situation, still looked dumbfounded.

Ellen Artorius stared at Cliffman from within the blue flames of Magic Body Strengthening.

"You could really die from now on."

"Uh… What?"

"I'm not kidding."

Battle.

It's not just a duel.

It's a real fight.

Ellen had discovered that Cliffman's talent would manifest itself in actual combat.

"Do you still want to do it?"

Only then did Cliffman realize what Ellen was sensing.

It's not about overpowering and finishing off the opponent. Only when his life is truly at stake and he feels that desperation will his talent shine brightly.

In a life-or-death fight, his talent truly shows its power.

That's why Olivia was brought here.

In a crisis, she can intervene and restrain Ellen, and she's a powerful possessor of divine power that can heal Cliffman if he's injured.

Cliffman stared into Ellen's calm eyes.

Olivia sighed and nodded, whispering something to Reinhardt.

Cliffman swallowed his saliva and looked at Ellen.

She's not kidding.

She said she would really fight to kill, and there was a safety measure, so she would actually fight to kill him.

"I'll do it."

Cliffman took his stance.

There was no need for further conversation.

Ellen stepped forward.

Thump!

Cliffman didn't even see Ellen approaching.

Whack!

"Gu… ugh!"

Bang!

Cliffman, who had been struck with a heavy blow to the abdomen, rolled several times across the training hall floor in an instant, groaning in pain.

"Gr… ugh… Cough! Gasp!"

Blood flowed from Cliffman's mouth even as he struggled to get up.

"Damn… That crazy woman!"

Olivia, with her face turning pale, quickly approached Cliffman and cast a healing spell on him.

"He… He. Gasp… Gasp…”

It was a blow that could have killed Cliffman from internal organ rupture if Olivia had not been there at the right time. Though the pain had subsided, Cliffman still trembled, his face pale.

Cliffman was speechless, and it was Olivia who seemed rather angry.

"Hey! Are you crazy? What will you do if you really die?"

But Ellen's expression remained calm.

"If you can't do it, let's stop. I have no intention of forcing you."

With a cold expression, Ellen said that to Cliffman.

"But if you do continue, I won't be playing around."

If a talent could only be brought out by risking one's life, then wouldn't it be halfway invoked if one's life was halfway at risk?

Cliffman was determined to become stronger.

In the end, it was the same approach as Reinhardt's.

Fight by risking your life. Reinhardt had grown stronger in the end.

If Cliffman wanted to follow that path, he too would have to engage in a fight where he might die.

Not a duel, but a fight.

Ellen had already made it clear that she had no intention of going easy on him.

That made even the slightest lingering hope in Cliffman's heart vanish.

Slowly, Cliffman stood up.

"Th-thank you… Senior. I-I will do it, regardless."

"Hey… What's wrong with you guys? Why are you going this far?"

Regardless of Olivia's shock, Cliffman was desperate in his own way.

He had decided to confront the Demon King and help avenge Liana.

He couldn't back down when he was offered to awaken an unknown talent within him.

"Let's do it, Ellen."

"Alright."

"No… Reinhardt, why are they like this?"

Olivia rushed up to Reinhardt, who seemed to reassure her by murmuring something about watching the situation first.

If it had been a practice sword, Cliffman would have been fatally pierced in the abdomen.

Ellen using her fists was the least restrictive measure.

Cliffman's talent transcended the choice of weapons used in combat.

Objectively, Ellen was stronger than Reinhardt.

Cliffman had lost to Reinhardt in just a few bouts, and he hadn't even seen Ellen's charge just now.

Olivia could heal him, but if she failed to react in time or missed a vital point, he could die.

The tension that Ellen wanted to instill was just that.

Make a mistake, and you might really die.

So, if you have some unknown strength within you, draw it out.

Cliffman himself had clung to Reinhardt all day, wanting to become stronger.

He couldn't tell Ellen he wanted to quit because the fight was too intense and frightening.

With gritted teeth, Cliffman stared at Ellen.

"Here I come."

Ellen warned once more and stepped forward.

-Thud!

He still couldn't keep up with her movements.

It was impossible to dodge what couldn't be seen.

Unless she deliberately missed, it was unachievable.

-Whoosh!

Ellen's fist was stopped by a white barrier that formed around Cliffman's chest.

Again, Cliffman couldn't react. The barrier that blocked Ellen's fist was a desperate

divine magic cast by Olivia.

“…Do you really intend to kill him?"

Olivia's voice trembled as she barely blocked the attack.

“…Wasn't this the flow he was supposed to avoid?"

Cliffman hadn't been able to dodge.

"No."

But just before the protective barrier was formed, Ellen saw that Clifman had moved slightly.

If there had been no barrier, he would have allowed the attack anyway.

"I tried to dodge something I couldn't even see."

Nevertheless, Clifman had definitely tried to avoid something he couldn't sense.

Whether it was instinct or something else, it was uncertain.

Clifman's talent couldn't lead to victory, but he did show movement toward it.

Olivia looked at Ellen and Clifman and sighed, seemingly helpless.

"You two aren't a good match. Come with me."

"…”

Olivia didn't know the specifics, but she knew the first-year students were up to something.

Ellen was too fast and strong. If she went all out, Olivia might not be able to react in time, and Clifman could actually be killed.

"Reinhardt, you do it."

"Being treated as a suitable opponent… feels somewhat like being a dog."

Reinhardt scratched the back of his head and grabbed Ellen's shoulder, pulling her back.

Olivia could handle emergencies and would pose a significant threat to Clifman if he went all out.

Ellen was not a suitable match.

"Well, it's not wrong."

So, in the end, there was no one but Reinhardt.

Clifman kept asking him to give it his all.

But that didn't mean to go for the kill.

Now, Reinhardt would go for the kill. He would put even more effort than Ellen, believing that Olivia would somehow handle it.

However, Clifman shouldn't trust that.

He had to believe that one wrong move could kill him in order to awaken his true talent.

Vroom!

Blue magical power wrapped around Reinhardt's body once more.

He strengthened his physical body through self-suggestion.

Fighting with the intent to kill, not just giving it all.

Clifman didn't know, but Reinhardt had quite a bit of experience with that. There was something only those who had gone through such battles possessed.

"Come on, let's do this."

Killing intent.

Clifman could feel the killing intent from Reinhardt.

The vague belief that Olivia would protect him disappeared with that single killing intent.

As if someone was strangling him.

Reinhardt charged at Clifman.

He wasn't as fast as Ellen.

But his speed was still difficult to perceive.

The movement of his shoulders.

Only his stride was visible.

Instinctively, Clifman calculated where Reinhardt was aiming through those movements.

Left foot planted.

Right shoulder retreating.

He realized that the right arm would soon move.

His body, not his mind, recognized that the trajectory was aimed at his face.

If the magically enhanced fist connected with his face and Olivia couldn't react…

He would really die.

She doesn't react.

He gets hit.

Shiiik!

But.

"…"

In that moment, Clifman dodged the fist with a slight tilt of his head and slipped into Reinhardt's embrace.

In the bizarre sensation where not the head, but the body itself reacted:

-Whoosh!

"…"

Ducking a hook, Cliffman's signature uppercut struck Reinhardt's jaw precisely.

Cliffman's strength and stature were far from ordinary.

And the jaw is a vital point.

Under normal circumstances, the fight should have ended here.

"Ah."

However, Reinhardt, who took the blow to the jaw, was grinning.

As if he didn't feel any impact at all.

"Certainly, it's a bit different?"

The difference in output and intensity.

-Whoosh!

"Ugh!"

As if to say he couldn't overcome it, Reinhardt delivered a knee strike to Cliffman's abdomen.

Cliffman reacted and even countered, but he couldn't penetrate the Magic Body Strengthening defense.

Watching Cliffman bounce away and roll on the ground, Reinhardt casually rubbed his jaw.

"Huff… Hah…”

"Give it another try."

Reinhardt grinned, watching Cliffman gasping for breath.

"You might get somewhere with practice."

It was genuinely meant as encouragement for Cliffman.

However, due to his expression, actions, and tone, he seemed like a third-rate villain.

Olivia's thought that it would be better for Reinhardt, rather than Ellen, to face Cliffman was correct.

Ellen was too fast and strong, creating an insurmountable barrier even for Cliffman's talents.

Of course, it's true that Reinhardt was weaker than Ellen, but he was able to draw out Cliffman's skills more technically.

-Boom! Bam! Thud!

He couldn't withstand Reinhardt's punches with all his strength, and there was a significant difference in their overall size.

However, Cliffman dodged and deflected Reinhardt's attacks, exploiting any openings.

Although he couldn't completely block the attacks, sometimes even getting pushed back and eventually taking a fatal blow, Olivia would then heal him. Clearly, Cliffman had changed.

Both Olivia and Ellen watched their fight.

“…I'm not sure, but his movements seem better than when he fought you?"

"I think so too."

Both somewhat felt that Cliffman's movements were better against Reinhardt than when he fought Ellen.

The talent for combat.

It's a talent that truly shines in dangerous situations and real-life combat.

Cliffman's talent was undoubtedly being exercised in the face of danger.

Ellen seemed to understand why Cliffman's talent was more strongly exhibited in the fight against Reinhardt.

It's hard to read emotions from Ellen's expression.

However, right now, Reinhardt was exuding hostility and even murderous intent.

In short, the reason was simple.

Ellen's expressions were minimal, and her demeanor was rather blunt.

Therefore, it was difficult to sense danger when facing Ellen's calm appearance. She was just a blunt person who was unpredictably lethal.

However, Reinhardt had a nasty expression.

In a fight, one might feel an overwhelming aura from an opponent, as if they could crush you at any moment.

And so, regardless of actual ability, Reinhardt exudes an 'I dare you to try' atmosphere, while Ellen does not.

In reality, when facing off against them, it's Reinhardt, not Ellen, who provokes a greater sense of tension.

Moreover, Ellen tends to finish a fight in a single move before any exchange of blows, while Reinhardt's aggressive demeanor and back-and-forth exchanges allow Cliffman time to realize he is being cornered.

-Wham!

"Urgh…!"

Therefore,

Reinhardt was, in many ways, the perfect opponent to draw out Cliffman's full potential. Reinhardt looked down at Cliffman as Olivia healed him.

"If this is the extent of your abilities, you still have a long way to go, don't you?"

Adding insult to injury.

Provoked by Reinhardt, Cliffman gritted his teeth and stood up again. Reinhardt smirked at him.

"Am I still going too easy on you?"

"…"

Ellen knew why Reinhardt acted this way.

On top of the sense of crisis, he wanted to provoke Cliffman, drawing out his desire to win.

"Even if you go easy on him, it seems like it'll still be tough."

She knew.

She knew why Reinhardt acted this way.

It wasn't for no reason.

"Try harder."

She knew, but

It was too much.

"Reinhardt… I know what you're trying to do, but that's really cruel."

Olivia also seemed to be feeling this in real-time, muttering to herself.

-Thud!

As Cliffman charged and swung his fist towards Reinhardt's vital spot, Reinhardt easily dodged and tripped him, sending him tumbling to the ground.

Reinhardt lifted his foot, aiming for Cliffman's head on the ground.

With a cold smile, he tried to stomp on Cliffman's face.

If he put all his strength into it, Cliffman's head would be crushed.

-Thud!

Reinhardt swiftly stomped down, but Cliffman barely rolled away and bounced back to his feet.

Although Reinhardt's taunts seemed petty, his attacks were ruthless.

As Cliffman got back up, Reinhardt smiled coldly.

That smile, boiling with malice and madness, was something one would want to think of as an act, but no matter how one looked at it, it wasn't.

"Why."

Reinhardt laughed as he looked at Cliffman.

"Imagine the Demon King right in front of you."

"Think of it that way."

Cliffman didn't know the true meaning behind those words, but a chill ran down his spine.

"Are you still going to fight like this?"

He didn't know what the real Demon King was like.

But would he still fight like this if the Demon King were right in front of him?

Rolling on the ground, somehow dodging, and having his own attacks be ineffective.

If the Demon King were really in front of him, he might not even be able to have this conversation. He might die without a chance to dodge the first attack.

Would he die helplessly without even squirming?

What was in front of him was not the Demon King. The Demon King would surely be a much more terrifying, evil, and powerful entity than Reinhardt.

"It's like image training, you see."

However.

Reinhardt wore a wicked smile, no matter how one looked at him.

"I am the Demon King."

He whispered to Cliffman.

I am the Demon King.

Cliffman couldn't comprehend the power imbued within those words. Yet, as soon as he heard Reinhardt's words, he felt something like an illusion.

It seemed as if what was before him wasn't Reinhardt but rather an unfathomable and powerful entity.

-Gulp-

Cold sweat drenched Cliffman's body.

As if he had fallen victim to some evil magic.

As if he had been hypnotized by Reinhardt.

Reinhardt felt like something completely different. Cliffman gave himself over to that insinuation or suggestion.

What stood before him was the Demon King.

He couldn't possibly stand a chance.

He couldn't possibly win.

But they had agreed to fight together.

Having agreed to fight together, he must be able to stand beside him. He couldn't be pushed aside in a real fight, stumbling and hindering.

He was weak.

If one is weak, they must gamble big when facing the strong.

What should he do if the true Demon King stood before him?

Even if it meant risking his life, he must land a blow. One arm, or perhaps one leg.

No, even if he couldn't do that, at least one finger.

If even that was impossible, then at least a scratch.

It would be an incredible feat for a weakling like him to achieve even that much against the Demon King. Since the Demon King would be powerful, even doing just that much would be considered heroic.

-Swish!

Cliffman attempted a counter, deflecting Reinhardt's incoming right fist with his left arm, but Reinhardt dodged with a slight chin movement and widened the distance again.

It was a decent defense.

His fists couldn't penetrate Reinhardt's Magic Body Strengthening, so this moment, in which he could deflect the unpredictable movements and aim for a counter, was proof of his growth.

This was enough.

This was the best the weak could do.

Simply evading Reinhardt's attacks.

If he could risk his life and land a scratch against the Demon King, that would be enough.

Though, even that seemed doubtful.

Could it really be enough?

"…"

Was that all he could do?

Cliffman clenched his teeth, watching Reinhardt with a cold smile as he sought an opening.

Was it okay to be weak?

Of course not.

His talent was in battle.

But the purpose of his talent wasn't just battle.

It was to achieve victory in battle.

To win fights.

The true name of this talent wasn't in the fighting itself.

The true name of this talent was victory.

To fight and seize.

To conquer.

He couldn't be satisfied with just a scratch.

He couldn't be satisfied with just evading.

The purpose of battle was victory.

There was no such thing as fighting to lose.

Thus, to achieve victory was to give meaning to the talent called battle.

"Here I come."

Reinhardt approached with a completely different expression than before, as if he truly intended to crush him. He charged with fierce determination, each step filled with intense resolve.

The instinctive warning of danger strikes Cliffman's mind.

Defeating the Demon King is impossible.

Even defeating Reinhardt seems out of reach.

Still, his talent must live up to its reputation.

He must make the impossible possible.

He must do what has never been done before.

There is only one thing to do.

Victory.

For the sole purpose of victory, Cliffman must fulfill various conditions.

First, he must dodge the attacks of an invisible enemy.

Whoosh!

Cliffman barely deflects Reinhardt's outstretched fist by pulling back his shoulder.

However, the attack continues. The trajectory of the low kick flying at him as Reinhardt switches his stance is unavoidable.

He has dodged what is unseen.

But an inescapable onslaught approaches.

Then, onto the next. Second.

He must withstand a blow that should normally send him flying.

Thud!

His thigh stands firm as it takes Reinhardt's low kick.

Reinhardt, not expecting Cliffman to hold his ground, leaves an opening.

An opportunity presents itself.

He has dodged what is unseen and withstood an attack he should not have been able to bear.

Then, onto the next. Third.

If the true worth of his talent is to turn an unwinnable fight into a victory,

He needs a powerful blow that can break through what has never been broken before, something that can penetrate the opponent's Magic Body Strengthening defenses.

A power similar to the psychic ability of self-suggestion.

Although the cause is different, the outcome must be the same.

A name that makes the impossible possible.

The talent to win.

Battle.

Just as self-suggestion had brought forth a miracle, he must invoke a similar miracle, albeit with a different cause.

While self-suggestion can make many things possible,

The talent of battle must make only one thing possible.

The relatively narrow condition of enabling victory.

Because it possesses a narrow condition, it must have an even more powerful output.

Rumble!

Everyone's eyes widen as they watch the explosive blue flame erupt from Cliffman's body.

“!”

Blue magic surges from Cliffman's body.

Roar!

“Ugh!”

Reinhardt is sent flying back by the punch Cliffman lands.

Thud!

“Uh… what?”

Olivia's stunned expression, as if she can't understand what she just witnessed.

“…”

Elem's calm demeanor, as if she somehow knew this would happen.

“…Dammit.”

Reinhardt, lying down and staring blankly at the training hall ceiling, mutters a single expletive with a mix of complicated emotions.

Reinhardt wore a very complex expression, knowing this would happen but still finding it difficult to accept the reality.

And then,

“Cough… gasp!”

Even Cliffman's planned fainting spell.

That day.

The on-duty priest's office took in one more patient.

CHAPTER 375

"Why Are All the First-Years Monsters?"

After taking the unconscious Cliffman to the on-duty priest's office, Olivia muttered incredulously.

Olivia couldn't believe that the other unconscious first-year, Ludwig, had done the exact same thing against Saviolin Turner the day before. At her words, Ellen stared intently at her.

"You're not one to talk."

"No… I wasn't like this either, you know? What's with all of you?"

It was a shocking event for Olivia, something that had never happened in the history of the Temple.

Two people had awakened their Magic Body Strengthening with just a day's difference.

Ellen, Reinhardt, Ludwig, and now Cliffman.

Four first-years had managed to use Magic Body Strengthening on their own.

It should have been an unprecedented event when Ellen had done it, but four first-years had accomplished it.

Saviolin Turner, who had been monitoring Ludwig in the recovery room, was equally baffled by the situation, but first checked on Cliffman's condition.

"It doesn't seem to be a major issue…"

Saviolin Turner was just as startled by Ludwig's case and was even more bewildered when Cliffman had awakened his Magic Body Strengthening a day later.

"What on earth is going on with you first-years…?"

The year was already quite impressive with two extraordinary individuals, but now two more had been added.

Ellen quietly watched Reinhardt.

Cliffman had achieved what he wanted, and Reinhardt had done his best to help draw out Cliffman's talent.

That was true.

However, Ellen noticed that Reinhardt's expression didn't seem very pleasant.

It wasn't the look of someone whose pride had been wounded by being outdone by Cliffman.

He seemed to be regretting something, as if questioning whether it was the right thing to do.

Ellen couldn't understand his complex expression.

Cliffman and Ludwig had awakened their Magic Body Strengthening.

Naturally, he received 2,000 achievement points for completing the event. To awaken the next talent, Supernatural Resistance, he needed an additional 5,000 points. He wanted to save some points, so he planned to secure more achievement points before awakening the next talent.

The effect of increased Magic Body Strengthening efficiency would also come into play.

Word of Cliffman naturally spread throughout not only the first-year students but also the entire Royal Class.

Upon hearing the news, Liana rushed to the recovery room to check on Cliffman's condition.

I didn't know if Cliffman would have been able to Magic Body Strengthening if I hadn't been his opponent. If the Gate Incident were to occur, it would be natural for

the kids to grow stronger for my sake. Now that history has changed too much, the first-year students might be swept away by the Gate Incident and die in unexpected situations.

However, both Cliffman and Liana had become stronger.

If their goal is to kill me and the Gate incident disappears, I'd find myself in a very strange situation, as I'd be helping the person trying to kill me.

However.

Even if I hadn't intervened, Cliff would have realized his Magic Body Strengthening eventually.

"It seems the potion to increase sensitivity to Magic Body Strengthening is almost fully developed. That'll be very helpful for close-combat specialists like Cliffman and Ludwig."

Listening to Harriet's explanation, I nodded my head.

Moonshine's development was nearing completion. With Moonshine's help, combat-oriented students would quickly awaken their Magic Body Strengthening and become accustomed to it.

"I never thought it would really be made."

"What about the other one?"

"That's almost complete too."

The power cartridge was not as far along as Moonshine, but it too was nearing completion.

In my opinion, the first-year students of the Royal class are just unbelievable.

Four first-year students awakened their Magic Body Strengthening on their own.

Magic-oriented students are huddled together, on the verge of creating not one but two groundbreaking items that could change the course of human history.

Both combat and magic-oriented students in the Royal class are engaging in crazy endeavors.

If the power accumulated by humanity does not explode in the form of the Gate incident, it will be directed at me.

Not only that, but there's another problem. Exceptionally talented individuals might attract the attention of those with ill intentions.

Harriet took a deep breath as she sipped her tea.

"You don't think all of this is because of your foresight, do you?"

I had ordered them to create something impossible, and they actually did it. As such, I should take credit for it. Harriet glared at me as if to say I shouldn't think that way.

She must think that since I've already accomplished this, I'll order them to create even stranger things in the future.

"Would I?"

“…What? I thought you'd definitely take the credit."

Harriet seemed a bit flustered since she didn't get the reaction she expected.

She must have thought I would order something even more bizarre this time.

As Harriet sipped her tea, she quietly looked out at the terrace.

"Ah, Liana…”

Out there, Liana could be seen running through the winter temple.

After seeing Cliffman's condition, she seemed to have gone straight back to her personal training. After all, hopping around wasn't something one needed a companion for.

Harriet silently watched Liana as she ran away along the path.

Her expression was sad.

Liana had changed, and so had Cliffman. Everyone was getting stronger.

"It can't be helped… but it feels like everyone is changing…"

The existence of the Demon King is causing everyone to change. Training and practicing their major were no longer vague tasks.

Some people now had specific goals. These goals made them more passionate, leading them to actions they wouldn't have taken under normal circumstances.

To Harriet, these changes seemed sad and frightening.

—---

Recently, there had been a significant event within the empire. It was the invasion of the demon in Levaina. Regrettably, a considerable number of high-ranking nobles and influential figures within the empire were among the casualties of that unprovoked attack.

It was the third guerrilla war waged by the demon tribe, further fueling the fear and hostility towards the Demon King.

However, few knew the truth behind that third assault.

Naturally, Charlotte de Gardias was among them. Bertus had identified the outline of the revolutionary forces and, disguised as the demon tribe, obliterated the leadership in one fell swoop.

Although a few knew the truth, they were not numerous, and all of them were people who would take the secret to their graves.

The spring palace.

Charlotte took a sip of her milk tea.

"Why did you come here?"

At Charlotte's words, Bertus, who was sitting opposite her, took a sip of his black tea and displayed a subtle smile.

Visiting each other's palaces was hardly the norm.

However, Bertus was now visiting Charlotte's palace. Since such a thing was quite unusual, Charlotte calmly let Bertus into the spring palace.

"Well, what do you think I came for?"

At Bertus's words, Charlotte narrowed her eyes slightly.

"Did you come to see what a loser looks like? Well, that's the only thing that comes to mind."

Loser.

At those words, Bertus twisted his lips as if he found it unexpected.

He hadn't expected Charlotte to accept the term so readily.

The revolutionary forces, one of the empire's biggest enemies, had been crushed without causing any losses to the empire, and even absorbed.

Although it couldn't be made public, Bertus had made a significant achievement.

A ruler must naturally be efficient. The emperor would appoint the more capable as the next emperor, separate from his personal affection for his children.

Bertus had proven his abilities.

And Charlotte had not proven anything.

After being released from the Demon King's castle, she had spent too much time recovering from the aftermath, and she still hadn't fully recovered.

Charlotte accepted her defeat without resistance.

"I thought you'd think it was unfair. Surprising."

"It's true that it's unfair. But it's also true that, even if you put aside my various issues, I didn't try to achieve something like you did, or I didn't do it."

If she hadn't been abducted to the Demon King's castle, if the soul of the Demon King hadn't settled within her, if she hadn't been too attached to finding the child.

Although she could make assumptions, it was pointless. Charlotte had made a choice, and in that moment, she had already decided to bear the consequences. As a result, she ended up gaining nothing, and Bertus, who had been working for the empire during that time, had achieved results.

So now, though it's not yet confirmed, Charlotte accepts her defeat as the outcome is almost certain.

'Was it all meaningless?'

Liberated from the Demon King's soul, a grim future approaches where one must die, having been eliminated from the competition for the throne.

On this path, and on that path, there is always nothing but death.

Born with countless privileges, it is the fate of Charlotte and Bertus to live a life where they must die if they cannot win.

Bertus narrows his eyes and gazes at Charlotte.

"Isn't it unfair? If it had been me who was kidnapped instead of you, the outcome might have been different, right?"

"It is unfair. I also think it's unjust. But that's not something either of us can change by complaining, is it?"

Thus, Charlotte did not get angry or agitated when Bertus scratched the surface of their situation in which victory was confirmed.

The result was there, and she accepted it.

If anything, this level of hardship was weak.

Begging on their knees, pleading for their life might allow them to be exiled instead. In a way, it's strange that such words are not spoken.

Rather, in this situation where victory and defeat have been determined, as Charlotte

calmly accepts the outcome, Bertus stares at her quietly.

The smile disappears from Bertus's face.

"Boring."

Even though he got what he wanted and defeated his only rival, he could not feel any sense of victory. Bertus seemed disappointed.

"Yeah, it's me being boring. Right now, this is all I can do. To prevent you from indulging in the joy of victory. How about that? Is it a bit more interesting?"

All I can do now is not try to beat you, but accept my defeat so that you can't be intoxicated with the joy of victory.

That's all there is to it. At those words, Bertus once again offers a subtle smile.

"If you do this, Reinhardt's efforts will be in vain."

"…!"

She knew that he would eventually find out. But she couldn't help but widen her eyes at the mention of that name at such a cruel timing.

Reinhardt saved Charlotte. He knew about what had happened in the Spring Palace and thus must have known about the Champion of Tu’an.

"What are you trying to say?"

Charlotte's gaze, which had been calm no matter what Bertus had said, now harbored hostility.

"Ah, just mentioning Reinhardt's name makes your expression look like you want to strangle me. It's quite effective."

Bertus chuckles, thinking that mentioning Reinhardt in the future would be a way to provoke her.

However, Charlotte was not in the mood for such jokes.

"If you harm Reinhardt, I'll kill you. No matter what happens. Somehow. Definitely."

"It sounds like a threat, but it's actually a plea."

"…"

Her words were sharp, but wasn't she just begging him not to hurt Reinhardt? Bertus smiles as he looks at Charlotte.

She had accepted everything regarding her own safety.

But in the end, what remains after her defeat, her desperation for Reinhardt, is immense.

"Please consider it."

"What?"

"Don't lay a hand on Reinhardt, whether I kneel or do anything else."

Bertus looked at Charlotte with a sinister smile.

"Try asking for a favor."

"…"

Charlotte stared into Bertus's eyes. She seemed to hesitate for a moment, and then slowly rose from her chair.

She took a few steps toward Bertus and silently knelt on the floor.

In her own palace.

Charlotte knelt before Bertus.

With her head bowed, she spoke quietly.

"He was only trying to help me. He thought I might die, so he wanted to save me. That's all. He has… no intention of becoming your enemy, or even opposing you. He just couldn't leave me alone… That's why he did it…"

Reinhardt was not your enemy, he had no such intention. He was only trying to save a friend.

"Leave Reinhardt alone. I beg you… I'm asking you…"

Charlotte pleaded with Bertus, her voice trembling as she knelt.

Bertus looked down at her quietly.

Charlotte de Gardias had always been arrogant and confident. It seemed as if not even a single drop of blood could be drawn from her. She had been cruel and ruthless to her enemies, and her strategies were always threatening.

Bertus had thought Charlotte's return would be a significant obstacle.

But after the incident in the Demon King's castle.

Too many things had changed.

Gone was the Charlotte de Gardias who was proud, arrogant, and an unyielding rival. She now knelt before him, not begging for her own life, but asking him not to touch a male classmate.

Ever since she returned from the Demon King's castle.

Charlotte seemed like a fragile glass that would shatter if touched incorrectly.

Once a captive princess, Charlotte de Gardias had become an ordinary girl ever since her return from the Demon King's castle.

It was as if something essential had been broken inside her. As if she had lost the attitudes and goals she had been forced to acquire and adopt while living as a noble being.

Having lost even the reason to find the mysterious child who had saved her, Charlotte now relied solely on Reinhardt.

In the first place, Charlotte could never have been Bertus's enemy for a very long time.

It wasn't a victory.

She had never intended to be his enemy and never tried to live as one. The girl, who had merely occupied a place in the struggle for the throne, had now knelt before a competitor who had grown too powerful to handle.

The reason for kneeling was simply to plead for the one person she relied on to be left alone, even if she didn't know why.

As Bertus looked down at the trembling Charlotte.

He suddenly thought.

If she was never an enemy to begin with.

There would be no need to kill her.

Was it necessary to lose everything by being dragged to the Demon King's castle, to fail in all her struggles, and even lose her life in the end?

Victory.

Was it ever so unpleasant?

Charlotte had no reason to kneel before him.

She should have told him to try and touch Reinhardt. To ask if he thought he would be safe from meddling with the champion of Tu’an. Rather, his political position would crumble.

That's what she should have said.

Charlotte wasn't ignorant of that fact.

However, just in case.

In case he didn't know.

Because there was a tiny possibility that he might actually touch Reinhardt.

That's why Charlotte knelt before Bertus. To erase even that small possibility.

She knelt not for herself, but for someone else. As he looked down at Charlotte kneeling with her head bowed, her slender shoulders trembling.

"Really…”

As he set down his teacup.

"How boring."

Bertus savored his hollow victory.

CHAPTER 376

Although the threat of war caused by the remnants of the demon world forces had not yet materialized, humanity found itself once more engulfed in fear of the demons, as they waged guerrilla warfare in various places.

Darkland was no longer a clearly identifiable base for these enemies.

Demons could suddenly appear anywhere, anytime, and launch attacks on humans.

Such fear was palpable across the entire continent.

The reason for this became clear when the students of the Temple, whose winter break had not yet ended, began returning.

"The students are returning."

"They must think the Temple is safe."

On a hill overlooking the Temple, which had become as crowded as during the school term due to the returning students who had gone home for the winter break, Epinhauser and I stood watching.

The majority of students who had returned home now thought that the Temple was safe, so they came back.

Unbeknownst to them, their greatest fear, the Demon King, was standing right in the middle of the Temple, looking down upon them.

Epinhauser didn't mock these students, nor did he reveal that I was the Demon King.

The fact that he had called me meant he had something to say.

"Several plausible theories about Akasha's function have emerged from the Order, but none are certain."

"I see."

Unless one sees Akasha directly or meets Cantus Magna, it is impossible to know what Akasha is.

"But one thing is certain: an artifact that infinitely records magic will never bring about a good outcome."

Extraordinary objects tend to bring about extraordinary events.

"In order to truly capture Cantus Magna this time, the Order plans to take an exceptionally great risk."

The Black Order didn't know what Akasha was, but they were determined to end the longstanding conflict.

"Will you cooperate?"

My answer to that question was already prepared.

"We are already on the same boat; what difference would it make?"

By joining hands with the Black Order, we would draw in Cantus Magna. Epinhauser quietly looked down at the hill below.

It was time to discuss how we would bring in Cantus Magna and the roles the Order and I, along with my forces, would play in this.

However, Epinhauser remained silent.

"It wasn't your doing, was it?"

“…No."

I knew what he meant.

The series of incidents related to the death of Duke Grantz.

People don't know what the Demon King wants, so they assume that anything could happen.

He attacked the Holy Knights out of the blue, and just as suddenly killed Riverrier

Lanze.

So, it was possible that he would randomly attack the capital of a small southern country, and coincidentally kill the major investors of the merchant guild who happened to be in the outskirts of the city.

Epinhauser may or may not know about the revolutionary forces, but he would certainly know that the nature of this incident was different from those before.

It seemed he knew that it wasn't something I had done.

"Do you feel wronged?"

That question came not from the Black Order, but from my teacher.

In response to his question, I quietly looked down at the hill.

I saw numerous students who had returned to the temple for their remaining winter vacation due to this commotion.

"Well, I don't know."

What's the point of feeling wronged?

There are still many more things to deal with.

"So, what should we do now?"

"A tomb of a Lich has been discovered in the Darklands."

"A Lich?"

"Yes."

It was a sudden revelation.

"Adventurers will naturally flock to that area."

Adventurers in the Darklands were still scouring every corner of the region, and the cursed Tiamata had been discovered there.

The Lich's dungeon had been found during the process of discovering new treasures.

"Is it because Cantus Magna might covet the grimoires in the Lich's tomb?"

"It's possible, but a Lich couldn't have developed anything too extraordinary. Of course, it's a powerful mage that stands out from the ordinary. But it's probably not at the level that Cantus Magna would covet."

Seeing Epinhauser dismiss the Lich, I realized how deeply knowledgeable the Black Order and Cantus Magna were about magic.

"The important thing is that the tomb of the Lich was discovered two months ago, but it's been less than a week since it became known as the actual tomb of a Lich."

The first discoverers of the dungeon either died at the hands of the Lich or perished in the dungeon without even reporting the discovery.

The explorations continued in the direction where missing adventurers were, and only now the existence of the Lich's tomb was revealed by the adventurers who managed to survive.

"The Order plans to fortify the Lich's tomb."

"Fortify it?"

"Yes. They plan to make it known that something more powerful than a Lich resides there. They want to fabricate rumors of an even more mysterious and bizarre entity. They'll set up a maze barrier around the dungeon, cause strange phenomena, and release ominous summons, chimeras, and homunculi. They hope the adventurers will mistake it for the appearance of the legendary fictitious being, the Arclitch."

They're spreading bait.

The bait named Arclitch.

"Adventurers will swarm in, and some survivors will be sent away with tales of discovering grimoires that shouldn't exist in this world. Mysterious, but monumental discoveries."

"…"

Cantus Magna wouldn't covet a grimoire from a mere Lich's tomb.

That's why the Black Order sets a trap, making the discovered Lich's dungeon appear as the stronghold of a more powerful and dangerous being. The trivial books that miraculously surviving adventurers brought back would become groundbreaking discoveries in the world of magic.

It was a statement that they would artificially spread the knowledge of forbidden magic or secret techniques throughout the world.

A few books were brought, and it made one wonder what kind of magic or treasures lay dormant within their depths.

The rumors would undoubtedly spread far and wide, and it was clear that Cantus Magna would eventually learn of it as well.

"Wait. If that's the case, the problem isn't Cantus Magna, but other adventurers and wizards getting involved."

At these words, Epinhauser stared at me.

"I believe I mentioned it earlier; the Order has decided to take a considerable risk with this matter."

They were prepared for a multitude of adventurers to flock to the scene. They wouldn't concern themselves with the lives lost in the process.

Of course, adventurers blinded by the prospect of striking it rich and still venturing into the dangerous location were a problem in their own right.

However, until the true big fish, Cantus Magna, was caught, people would continue to die in the current structure.

The tomb of the Lich had been discovered.

But it was disguised to appear as if it belonged to an extremely powerful being, separate from the Lich.

"Then that tomb of the Lich… The situation must be quite strange."

Wouldn't it be bizarre for the Lich, who was minding its own business, to suddenly be swarmed by outside forces, with adventurers banging on its door while shouting about archliches and the like?

"There's no need to worry about that. It's already agreed to cooperate."

"Cooperate?"

"Yes, since the tomb requires an owner, we didn't kill it."

So they barged into the Lich's tomb and said, "Hey, we're going to use this place."

"Sure, make yourself at home (not their home)."

Was that how it went?

The Lich, who had no prior relationship with them, suddenly seemed pitiable.

"The tomb needs to be expanded, and the magical barriers and spells around the dungeon need to be adjusted. While we're discussing this, the Order is already working on it."

The goal was to reel in Cantus Magna.

The Black Order was even prepared to unleash numerous dark arts upon the world for this purpose. They planned to expand the Lich's dungeon and turn it into an even more complex and dangerous place than its original structure.

"It's like… operating a dungeon to lure in Cantus Magna."

"You could say that."

Dungeon operation, indeed.

Of course, it was the Black Order doing it, not me, but the means to achieve the goal seemed rather convoluted.

The tomb of the Lich was discovered, but they subdued the original owner, forcibly expanded the tomb, and made it even more dangerous, waiting for the real prey to arrive.

The moment the inner depths of the dungeon were exposed, the dungeon would lose its value. Hence, nobody could penetrate the heart of the dungeon. The dungeon would continue to draw in adventurers, and occasionally, let them escape with treasures.

However, during this process, there was a high possibility that not Cantus Magna but some other powerful group would dispatch an exploration party composed of strong individuals.

The Black Order, aware of the extreme danger of this endeavor, was still attempting to erase Cantus Magna from the world forever.

It was an incredibly perilous task that would draw the attention of the entire continent, and countless adventurers would lose their lives.

"But… wouldn't it be more convenient to disguise oneself as a genius with a vast amount of magic, or as a reclusive magician…?"

Is there really a need to follow such a path?

Wouldn't it be better to proceed as if a reclusive archmage has revealed himself? After years of research, he has developed countless spells. That way, there would be no need to attract unnecessary attention.

"Then, you'd be hunted down as a dark magician possessing numerous forbidden spells. You'd end up in a fight anyway, and the scale would be even larger."

"Ah."

Between treasure-seeking adventurers showing up one by one, and a reclusive archmage developing countless secret spells and then appearing in the world, the latter was far more dangerous.

The Mage could threaten to release his research materials, and if that were to happen, it wouldn't be just adventurers swarming, but entire mage guilds hunting him down.

Epinhauser's words that attracting attention as a human mage would lead to even larger-scale battles were eerily accurate.

The events of Darkland occurred beyond the boundary of the human world.

Due to that psychological distance, many humans would not care about whatever happened there.

But if a dangerous dark mage existed within the human world, they would frantically try to stamp it out, as if a fire had been set at their feet.

Epinhauser's perspective that constructing a dungeon would, in fact, lead to less bloodshed was somewhat understandable.

The Black Order would create a fake dungeon to lure people in.

However, this would be far more dangerous than a real dungeon and would contain powerful treasures.

But the Black Order wouldn't go through all this trouble just to suffer losses.

They must have something they wanted as well.

"First, if you have any magic that can influence the structure or external environment of the dungeon, we would appreciate your support."

"Yes."

"And the most important thing."

Epinhauser looked at me.

"Although the original owner of that place, the Lich, is a powerful mage and has agreed to cooperate with us, we need a strong force to be prepared for emergencies. The Order plans to station one person there, but it would be great if you could also lend us one person from your side. Think of it as having one person in charge of the dungeon from both our side and yours."

His words weren't wrong.

However.

In the end, they were discussing various matters without considering the

homeowner's wishes.

It felt as if something more than just trash had been created.

"We'll discuss the matter."

The plan to involve Cantus Magna.

The fake dungeon operation.

It was unclear how this would turn out, but if they were to involve Cantus Magna, they needed the rumors to spread as quickly as possible.

And one person to act as the guardian of the dungeon.

But would there be someone willing to do that?

Fortress Epiaux.

"I will do it."

Antirianus readily accepted upon hearing the detailed story.

As soon as the Vampire Council was convened to discuss the matter, Antirianus immediately responded, leaving everyone else no choice but to be taken aback.

It was good that the Council convened just a day after Lucinil delivered the request for the assembly.

But didn't this make everyone else's effort seem wasted, except for Antirianus?

Eleris, Gallarush, Luruien, and Lucinil all stared intently at Antirianus.

Why are you like this again?

Their expressions seemed to say as much.

“…Isn't your decision too hasty?"

At my question, Antirianus chuckled and laughed.

"On the contrary, I think it's a very good opportunity."

"Good?"

Lucinil cocked his head.

"First of all, the idea of luring Cantus Magna by making an already existing dungeon even more dangerous than it's known to be is quite interesting. However, didn't you say we will ultimately throw numerous bait at them?"

The Black Order was willing to take risks and prepared to leak many secret scrolls and spells. And I was also willing to support them with any useful grimoires from the Demon King's bunker.

"With all those visions that will be used as bait, I don't understand why you wouldn't want this opportunity."

Ah.

So that's how he approached it.

"Black Order's visions… Of course, they might be limited in scope…"

Luruien nodded as if it made sense, and the others seemed convinced as well.

The dungeon administrator position wasn't a bothersome role, but rather a place where one could freely access numerous secret scrolls and visions that the Black Order would use as bait. Since they decided to throw those into the world anyway, there was no reason to prevent Antirianus from seeing them.

This place was not for dungeon guards, but rather for peering into the visions of the Black Order.

In other words, it meant there was no particular intention other than swiftly devouring them.

But really…

There was something subtly appealing about the excessive honesty, although it was still a bit off-putting.

Antirianus, could it be that you actually have no ulterior motives?

"Then I shall announce that the head of the Saturday clan will be in charge. The date and location for contacting the Order's member will be communicated later through the head of the Wednesday clan."

"I eagerly await that moment, O great being."

While bickering over who would take on the task, I had anticipated that, in the end, either Eleris or Lucinil would reluctantly have to do it.

However, the greedy old man willingly took on the responsibility, and the matter was resolved without further debate.

CHAPTER 377

Eleris did not look particularly pleased.

It was a plan to create an artificial dungeon that would swallow up countless adventurers in order to lure Cantus Magna, but she couldn't help but worry for those who would lose their lives in their pursuit of fortune.

It was strange that she had agreed to the plan that would inevitably lead to someone's death.

"If our business is finished, I shall take my leave."

"Please do."

Antirianus, Gallarush, and Luruien cast their teleportation spells and soon vacated the room.

Only Lucinil, Eleris, and I remained in the council chamber.

"Where's Lydia?"

"I told her to wait in her room."

I wondered if she was doing alright, spending so much time in such a cold and desolate place. Eleris seemed to be taking good care of her, but it almost felt like she was being raised like livestock.

Anyway, that wasn't the issue at hand.

"Alright. Lucinil and Eleris, come with me for a moment."

"Do you have more business to attend to?"

I nodded in response to the silver-haired girl's question.

"Let's go to the Demon King's Castle."

"The Demon King's Castle? That's… Oh, now that I think about it…"

"Right. It was said to be a hideout of sorts."

"Yes, we'll go there."

We needed to find a spell that could help with the fake dungeon construction and disguise. However, I was completely ignorant when it came to magic, so even if there were such spells at the Demon King's Castle, I wouldn't know. Moreover, the Order might question why we brought it up if it were already a well-known spell.

Thus, taking two archmage-level vampire lords with me should increase our chances of finding something useful.

I had informed Lucinil about the bunker, and Lucinil had relayed the information to Eleris, so they both knew about it. I wasn't sure if they had informed the other vampire lords, but I couldn't go to the Demon King's Castle bunker alone.

There were still garrison forces stationed there, and since I couldn't use magic, I wouldn't be able to avoid their gaze and reach the labyrinth located on the sixth underground floor.

However, with Lucinil and Eleris accompanying me, things would be different.

We arrived at the outskirts of the Demon King's Castle using a series of teleportation spells rather than warp gates.

"It's enormous."

Lucinil gaped at the sight of the majestic walls of the Demon King's Castle, visible even from a distance.

Despite the fact that it had eventually been conquered.

"Let's go."

Using various spells like invisibility and sound suppression, the three of us carefully made our way toward the Demon King's Castle, making sure to stay out of the

garrison's sight.

"We don't necessarily need to find a dangerous spell. It doesn't have to be a dungeon trap or barrier. A spell that Cantus Magna would desire, something not too dangerous yet enticing enough to serve as bait, should suffice."

"Understood."

"Yes, Your Highness."

We would have to provide bait, just as the Black Order would. Regardless of the Black Order's true intentions, we would be allies until we found Cantus Magna and Akasha.

I knew I had to think about what would happen next, but for now, finding Akasha was my priority.

If I were a practitioner of magic, I might not have carelessly scattered those blood-like magical tomes, but I was an outsider when it came to magic.

Even though I knew they were valuable, I didn't feel guilty.

However, I couldn't take too many books. Charlotte might find out later that some books were missing. Of course, even if she found out, she wouldn't realize that I had taken them.

The garrison didn't detect us, and I took the lead since I knew the way.

The inside of the Demon King's castle was vast, so we moved for quite some time.

The garrison had already explored almost every part of the castle, except for the labyrinth. The commander had given up on investigating the labyrinth, and Charlotte hadn't pressed the issue.

The garrison would withdraw soon, having found nothing.

Eleris looked sad as she gazed upon the Demon King's castle.

She had always disliked war, but for some reason, she was the only one on the Council who had sworn loyalty to the Demon King. She had become a spy in the

empire and then returned to the Demon King's castle.

I couldn't tell what Eleris was thinking.

"We need to go to the fifth basement level."

I knew where the entrance to the labyrinth was.

We walked diligently.

"There's no need for invisibility. There's no one here at all."

"Indeed."

Lucinil muttered in disbelief. Of course, that didn't mean we dispelled our invisibility and noise-canceling spells.

It seemed that due to Charlotte's lack of inquiry, Commander Alfred felt as if he had received a pardon.

So, the exploration had stopped entirely. The garrison was just loitering around the vicinity of the Demon King's castle, waiting to withdraw.

Soon, we reached the fifth basement level of the Demon King's castle, the breeding ground, and arrived at the entrance to the labyrinth.

"It's not that big?"

"Isn't it like that for all?"

"I didn't know such a place existed…"

"In the labyrinth, it seems the path only opens if there's an Archdemon."

At that time, I wasn't sure whether Charlotte had opened the path or I had. The only thing I knew was that the passage was connected to the labyrinth, but only if you were with an Archdemon.

Fortunately, the labyrinth guided me to the exit, even in my Reinhardt form.

As we descended the circular staircase, a long, straight corridor appeared, ending in a door.

At least I was sure that the labyrinth guided me correctly, regardless of my appearance.

But what if Charlotte came alone?

That part was still uncertain.

Eleris and Lucinil followed behind me.

With a creak, the door opened, and we arrived at the vast space I had previously reached with Charlotte and Saviolin Turner.

"Wow, what is all this?"

Upon arriving at the huge chamber, Lucinil widened her eyes and looked around.

Eleris, too, was bewildered as she looked at the passages and rooms.

"In the Demon King's castle… since when has there been such a place…"

Eleris mumbled blankly, looking around. There were supplies for living, bedrooms and kitchens, alchemy potions, and even a library. Lucinil and Eleris couldn't help but be astonished.

"It seems to have been built as a shelter… a space where no one but an Archdemon can enter…"

If I hadn't lost my memory, I would have come here.

It was still a headache to figure out what kind of impact Valier's survival had on the original story.

"Enough with the admiration. Let's search for the grimoires."

"Yes, Your Highness."

"Did I not say that we should look for grimoires that Cantus Magna would find

tempting, or ones that would be useful in dungeons, like traps or barriers?"

"Yes."

"Alright."

Lucinil seemed to mull over my suggestions before heading into the library with Eleris to start searching.

I couldn't just stand idly by, so I began rummaging through the library's shelves.

"Wow… There's so much here."

"Indeed."

To be honest, this library was more than just a few shelves. There were enough books to rival a decent-sized library.

I wondered if all of them were grimoires, but there were also books for non-mages, such as those on swordsmanship and weapon techniques, scattered about.

"Hey, Archdemon."

I heard Lucinil calling me.

"Yes? What is it?"

"'What is it?' is informal."

"Yes, what is it?"

"Ugh, never mind. Anyway, you said you didn't know this place existed because you lost your memory?"

"Yes."

Lucinil's face appeared between the shelves, his cheeks puffed out in thought.

"So, if you hadn't lost your memory, you would've come here?"

"I suppose so?"

"Hmm…"

Lucinil tilted his head.

"Could the previous Demon Lord have survived if he had fled here?"

"Maybe."

This place was for Valier Junior, not for the previous Demon Lord. So, Valier didn't flee to the labyrinth but stayed in the Demon Lord's castle to fight against Ragan Artorius.

It didn't make sense for a ruler to flee when the allied forces were approaching the Demon Lord's castle.

Lucinil nodded, seemingly understanding this logic.

"Anyway, this place couldn't fulfill its purpose, since you couldn't enter in the end."

This bunker lost its purpose when I became Valier Junior.

And it wasn't until quite some time had passed that I finally discovered its existence.

Lucinil scanned the bookshelves, deep in thought. She picked up books, sometimes returning them or levitating them beside herself with psychokinesis. Eleris also browsed the shelves with a thoughtful expression.

I found a book on soul-manipulation magic in this place. I gave it to Charlotte immediately, but I couldn't help but wonder if it might also help Lucinil.

Could there be another book on soul-manipulation magic in this vast library that I didn't find before? Though this wasn't a real library, so it might not have extra copies of books. Still, I couldn't help but search.

Unable to find anything that met the conditions I had suggested, I was looking for other books on soul-manipulation magic in case they might be of any help to Lucinil.

"Hey, Archdemon."

"Why do you keep calling me? And stop calling me an Archdemon!"

"Alright, Valier."

"What for?"

Lucinil looks at me from across the bookshelf, with several books floating around her.

"Do you know what you're looking at? You're clueless about magic."

What's this now?

I was just trying to help.

But she didn't seem to be getting defensive; she genuinely seemed curious.

Maybe she's implying I should stop wasting energy on something I wouldn't understand and take a break instead.

Speaking of which, I'm somewhat curious about the taste of the preserved food here. It doesn't seem like I'll find the book I'm looking for, and my role is to open the path, not to find the book directly.

Just as I was thinking that,

[Introduction to Soul-binding Magic]

A book in an inconspicuous spot caught my eye.

There it was.

And I had a feeling I knew why there was another copy of the same book.

Though it was the same book, the language written on the title was different.

It was not the common language but the demon language.

It was the demon language version of the soul-binding magic book.

"Lucinil, have you ever heard of soul-binding magic?"

"Huh? Soul-binding magic?"

Holding the demon language introduction to soul-binding magic, I look at Lucinil.

"Just have a look at this for now."

Get ready to thank me, little one.

Unfortunately, I didn't receive any words of gratitude from Lucinil.

It wasn't because she couldn't read the demon language introduction.

"I already know this."

“…What?"

After skimming through the book, Lucinil said that.

"Soul-manipulating techniques may be taboo, but do you think I wouldn't know about this after living for so many years?"

Lucinil, who had wanted a soul, had likely done extensive research on soul-manipulation magic as well.

"This may not be a common magic book, but regrettably, it's magic I already know."

Lucinil gently runs her fingers over the cover of the Introduction to Soul-binding Magic.

Knowing the magic already meant that even with soul-binding magic, Lucinil couldn't achieve her secret desire.

"I could probably merge another's soul with mine, but I don't have a soul myself. That means I wouldn't be merging with another being; I'd be absorbed. That's why I couldn't try it."

The concept of merging different souls doesn't apply to Lucinil.

In the end, does that mean magic involving souls is useless for a being without a soul?

If so, what exactly is a soul?

I had never thought about it before, because I had one.

Only Lucinil, who didn't have a soul, desperately studied souls.

Lucinil looks at me and smiles subtly.

"Anyway, you thought of me, didn't you? I appreciate that."

"It's not like that."

"Oh, you're that kind of person. Fine. Cute."

Why is she being so annoyingly sweet?

In any case, it was Lucinil who had pondered the most about souls. After discovering a book about soul fusion, I wondered if it might be of help to Lucinil…

But the reality was quite the opposite.

Lucinil was the one who knew the most about soul-related magic, as she had spent a long time researching magic to obtain it.

So, the person with the highest probability of finding a solution to Charlotte's problem would be Lucinil.

"I have a question."

"What is it?"

Lucinil nodded, encouraging me to speak my mind.

"If there were a soul fused from two souls, could it be separated back into its original state, like before the fusion?"

Research on soul fusion was already underway.

However, Lucinil had already completed all the research. So, she must have known everything there was to know about soul fusion.

If the situation was urgent, Lucinil might be able to help Charlotte. Although, I would still have to think about how to explain it and what approach to take.

But then…

"Is that possible?"

With Lucinil's innocent response, all my hopes were shattered.

—---

Lucinil didn't know why I had asked that question.

But as if it was completely obvious, the response came back that it couldn't be done.

"You could mix two glasses of water into one cup and then pour it back into two glasses, but they wouldn't return to the original two glasses of water, right?"

“…Is that the concept?"

"It's a bit different in reality, but it's not much different from that."

It's impossible to return something that has already mixed and become one to its previous, separate state.

The image of Charlotte, overjoyed when she received the book about soul fusion, came to mind.

However, if Lucinil's words were true, even the research on soul fusion would not yield the results Charlotte desired.

Then what should I do?

If Charlotte's soul had already become inseparable from the Demon King's soul the moment they merged, would she have to live like this for the rest of her life? Waiting

to be consumed by the Demon King's soul someday?

"Anyway, why are you curious about that?"

Should I tell her?

That the soul of the Demon King still lingers within the soul of the princess?

Lucinil might know what to do. If I tell her the truth, I might have to discuss what I want to do about it.

If it's possible, it's possible.

Even if it's not, it would be better to know for sure.

Now, I wanted to have something definitive.

"The previous Demon King fused a part of his soul into someone else's."

“…What?"

At my words, Lucinil's mouth hung open, as if she had heard an unbelievable story.

"No… Did he really do such a thing?"

"The circumstances make it quite certain."

"So, even after detaching part of his soul and implanting it into someone else… he was still fine?"

"I'm not quite sure about that, but…”

Lucinil thought that what the Demon King had done to Charlotte was terrible, but it seemed as if she perceived it in the exact opposite way.

The insane act of splitting one's own soul was already an awful thing to do to oneself.

"Is it hard to bear a fragmented soul?"

"It's not just about being difficult to handle; it's a miracle that one doesn't go mad. I

might not have been able to maintain my sanity… What kind of person was the previous Demon King?"

It is unknown whether the predecessor Valier had gone insane. However, considering the way the Demonic War unfolded, it seemed that he was not completely consumed by madness or had lost his senses.

Planting his soul in Charlotte must have been a huge risk for the Demon King as well.

And so, at that time.

It was understandable that the Demon King's soul, which had been corroding Charlotte's body, was on the verge of being lost. He didn't recognize me, and he just seemed to be mad.

The Demon King had somehow managed to keep his sanity, but the soul that had mixed with Charlotte could not maintain its identity, could it?

After hearing my story, Lucinil was dumbfounded.

"So… he knew he would lose in the Demonic War… and prepared in advance for some kind of resurrection. I don't know if that's even possible…"

Lucinil seemed to think that what the Demon King had attempted was too dangerous.

"Do you want to fully resurrect the soul of that Demon King?"

I shook my head in response to Lucinil's question.

"No. I want to get rid of it."

"…?"

What a brat, huh?

Lucinil looked at me with that kind of expression.

CHAPTER 378

Lucinil had a style of minimal interference.

Even if I were to engage in activities unrelated to the reconstruction of the Demon Realm, Lucinil wouldn't mind. It was not only due to a lack of interest in my endeavors, but also because Lucinil was willing to help when possible.

"Look, Archdemon, isn't it a child's duty to try and revive their father or something, even in such a situation? I mean, I'm not sure if it's normal, but even a Homunculus Vampire like me knows that much."

But this time, it seemed too incomprehensible.

It was perverse to say that one wanted to eliminate a soul that had entered another person's soul, including my father's.

Lucinil stared at me intently, as if trying to read something unreadable.

Would I have to tell an unbelievable story like I did to Eleris?

"I don't think you're worried about not being able to eat if the Demon King is resurrected… Well, I guess you have your own reasons."

Lucinil crossed her arms, as if she was not curious.

"Anyway, I don't know who implanted a part of their soul into another, but I agree with you. If we separate the soul again, they will become two mixed together, and it won't be possible to return to the original state. Of course, I can't guarantee whether the two separated will be sane or not."

It's impossible to return to the original state.

So, is there no other answer besides coexistence?

"Then, who will become the owner of the body, or rather, the owner of the soul… Is it impossible to determine?"

"Hmm… I don't know what you're talking about, but are you curious whether the person with the mixed soul will have control over the body, or if the Demon King will?"

"Yes."

Can't we do something about the fact that Charlotte's body is occasionally crushed by the power of the Demon King, being devoured or losing its sanity?

"It's inevitable that a collision will occur. It's like a side effect. However, as time goes by, it gets better. It's a common symptom when different souls merge."

It gets better as time goes by.

Is it really going to be okay?

"I'm not sure if that's the right expression, but as it reaches a stable phase, those symptoms will gradually disappear, and everything will be fine. Moreover, it's not a matter of who has control in the first place. They just become one. It's like they're simultaneously two and one… something like that?"

Charlotte's soul and the Demon King's soul have already become one.

Time will heal.

Becoming complete while mixed with the Demon King.

"Eventually, as time passes, the Demon King's ego and the ego of that other person will become a fully integrated state. As you said, it's impossible to eliminate the Demon King's soul and ego."

It cannot be stopped.

As long as Charlotte does not die, the Demon King will be resurrected.

Charlotte's current symptoms are the result of merging with the Demon King's soul.

But since they are already mixed, separation is also impossible.

"By the way, you seem to know that someone quite well. It seems like you even

witnessed such a struggle for dominance."

"Yes… Well."

"Hmm, have you ever had a direct conversation with the Demon King?"

No.

We fought, but undoubtedly, that day the Demon King had gone completely mad.

"I tried to communicate, but it didn't work. The Demon King didn't even recognize me."

Indeed, I showed the Demon King who had possessed Charlotte's body the image of the former Demon King, Valier, but it didn't recognize me at all. Hence, we had no choice but to fight.

At my words, Lucinil tilted her head.

"Hmm, so the separated part lost its reason. The conversation didn't go through at all?"

"Yes."

"Then the separated soul of the Demon King went mad."

Is that how it turned out?

What about next time?

"What happens then?"

"Hmm…"

Charlotte's condition cannot be reversed.

"Over time, it'll get better. Souls also adapt to survive. The madness will gradually subside."

With time, it'll get better.

An unexpectedly simple solution appeared.

However, Charlotte realized that she could no longer live as just Charlotte.

Is she to become a being that is both Charlotte and the former Demon King, Valier?

Lucinil tilted her head.

"By the way, if such outbursts become frequent, the complete fusion would be nearing its end, and the Demon King's consciousness will emerge. Any signs of that? Like behaving like a Demon King, or recognizing you… something like that?"

Becoming one with the Demon King means becoming one with the Demon King's ego.

As the madness of the Demon King, driven mad by the effects of the soul-splitting, subsides and the fusion stabilizes, Charlotte will absorb the Demon King's consciousness.

Soon, she will have the memories too.

"Nothing… nothing at all."

However, the Charlotte I've seen so far showed no signs of that.

If the Demon King's memories had returned and the egos had merged, Charlotte wouldn't have tried to resolve this situation in the first place.

The tears, anger, and sadness that Charlotte showed me were all real.

I cannot believe that Charlotte has concealed everything while possessing the memories and consciousness of the former Demon King. Lucinil crossed her arms and frowned.

"Well, it's not uncommon. Sometimes a split soul goes mad and loses its consciousness altogether… Hmm. But the Demon King's soul shouldn't be that weak."

One soul merges, but one side is so weak that its consciousness disappears entirely.

But seeing Lucinil's reaction that the Demon King shouldn't be like that, something

came to my mind.

The Soul Speech.

Certainly, I had used the Soul Speech.

The Soul Speech is not magic.

It's clear that the Soul Speech I possess somehow affected Charlotte's condition and the Demon King's soul that had been lingering within her.

"Recently, there was an episode… but there was no madness."

Charlotte's power had an outburst once recently.

"Uh-huh… Is that so? Did you try talking? Was it the Demon King's side?"

"No, the original owner of the body maintained their ego."

Charlotte came to me, trembling with fear as her power surged. However, she clearly wasn't insane, nor did she feel as if she possessed another's ego.

"Hmm… What is that?"

Lucinil seemed to not understand my words at all.

"Did his ego truly vanish? He's capable of soul fusion, yet he didn't care about that?"

I thought that Lucinil's understanding of the magic skills and soul fusion of the previous Demon King couldn't possibly be that limited. But in reality, Lucinil could only think that the Demon King had misused soul fusion, causing this outcome.

No, that's not it.

The Demon King used soul fusion correctly.

There must have been a surge, but gradually, Charlotte's soul would have fused with the Demon King's, becoming one.

The day I first awakened the Word Magic.

The very first Word Magic I used.

Disappear from Charlotte's body.

I had clearly said that.

Although Charlotte's power surged once more afterward, it didn't erode her sanity.

The souls of the Demon King and Charlotte cannot be separated.

So, did my supernatural power make the Demon King's ego vanish, not his soul?

"How strange…"

If that's the case, I no longer need to struggle to save Charlotte.

I already saved her at that moment.

The Demon King's insane ego has disappeared, leaving only his power.

What Charlotte must do is not to separate the souls, but to adapt to the remaining power of the Demon King.

That was all she needed to do.

"Anyway, it seems like he's more concerned about the mixed souls than the Demon King."

Lucinil shook her head in confusion.

"Such a weird person."

Of course, Lucinil didn't ask any more questions.

Instead, I became curious.

"But how do you know so much about it?"

"Soul absorption?"

"Yes."

Lucinil shrugged her shoulders.

"I've conducted a few experiments."

Ah, that's why her expression was like that.

The Vampire Lords were all madmen, weren't they?

—---

When I heard from Lucinil that the mixed souls couldn't be separated, I felt like the sky was falling.

However, as we continued to talk, I realized that Charlotte no longer needed any intervention.

Despite being consumed by the power, she came to me with her sanity intact.

That in itself was evidence. The power itself tainted Charlotte, but her mind remained unaffected, as the Demon King's ego no longer existed.

The situation itself was evidence that Charlotte was fine.

Soul absorption couldn't be a clue, but that didn't matter. Charlotte would be fine from now on.

However, even though I knew Charlotte was fine, it was uncertain if others would accept it.

In the end, the problem was whether Charlotte could accept that her power was no longer a threat, and how the royal family would accept it once she fully adapted to it.

At first glance, the ominous power she possessed was a weakness for Charlotte.

It was a vulnerability that Bertus could attack at any moment.

Lucinil was a master of soul manipulation.

It seemed she had conducted many experiments with souls to gauge possibilities. Imagining Lucinil handling test subjects with such an innocent expression, using magic to manipulate their souls, sent shivers down my spine.

Wouldn't the openly sinister Antirianus be a better choice?

Though Lucinil and I weren't particularly close, during our various conversations, Eleris had brought several books from the library.

"There are so many unfamiliar grimoires that it took me quite some time to choose."

Eleris explained that it took a long time to determine what kind of magic each book contained, and whether or not they were suitable to take, as many of the spells' names were indecipherable. Even so, I thought she was quite fast.

Eleris seemed not to have heard the conversation about Charlotte, as she was so focused.

"That must be the accumulated knowledge of the Darklands over a long history."

The long and storied knowledge collected by demon kings or demon magicians. Lucinil muttered, looking towards the library.

"But wouldn't it be better for you to either retrieve or burn all of these books? You came here with the princess, didn't you?"

Lucinil looked at me as he stopped speaking.

I had come here with the princess, and I had discovered the bunker beneath the demon king's castle. I told Lucinil as much.

Why did I come here with the princess?

And the conversations we'd just had.

The grimoires containing the magic of the underworld.

Stories of soul manipulation and the like.

Her expression showed that she had caught on.

"Oh, don't tell me the soul of the demon king or something was the princess."

“…Yes."

"You don't care about rebuilding the demon world at all, do you?"

From what I'd said so far, she would know that I was trying to save the princess, which contradicted all the superficial goals I had mentioned.

"I can see why Eleris is helping you."

Lucinil sighed, as if her doubts had finally been resolved. Eleris seemed slightly embarrassed, perhaps because she had thought Lucinil would eventually figure it out.

I had no intention of hiding it.

They wouldn't believe it had come to this anyway.

"So, what do you want to do? What exactly do you want?"

"World peace."

Lucinil furrowed her brow.

“…Are you asking me to believe that?"

"It's true."

Lucinil looked at Eleris, as if she didn't want to even bother talking with someone who spouted such nonsense.

"That's right, Lucinil."

Eleris smiled brightly and confirmed it.

"It's even more frightening when Eleris says it too."

Lucinil looked back and forth between Eleris and me, as if telling us to stop joking around.

“…No, what does world peace have to do with this? I'm even more confused now."

As Lucinil saw that neither Eleris nor I seemed to be joking, she mumbled with a flustered expression.

"Just accept it for now, then."

It was something Lucinil had once said to me.

"Alright."

As if deciding not to try to understand what was difficult to comprehend, Lucinil readily nodded.

CHAPTER 379

Charlotte's condition had seemed beyond recovery, but then they discovered new information that she had been improving for some time.

Now, it was time to return to their main objective.

Magic that could aid in dungeon management, or a grimoire to lure Cantus Magna. Both Eleris and Lucinil had selected and brought grimoires for this purpose.

"I was curious about the magic used in this underground labyrinth," Eleris said.

It was a labyrinth that only designated individuals could enter.

"If such a labyrinth were installed in a dungeon that decided to operate it, adventurers could be made to wander without killing them and eventually be sent back," she explained.

"Eleris is always consistent, isn't she?" Lucinil muttered with a subtle smile, looking at Eleris, who had chosen magic that could create as many survivors as possible and reduce casualties.

Eleris slightly furrowed her brows at his comment.

"Lucinil, the reason Black Order and we operate dungeons is not to gain infamy but to spread the dungeon's fame as quickly as possible so that Cantus Magna will approach us. So, wouldn't it be better to have more survivors who, although they did not reach the end of the dungeon, return with very valuable rewards? The rumors will spread faster and more reliably, right?"

At Eleris's words, which stated that reducing casualties was important but also having more survivors was more faithful to their main objective, Lucinil squinted her eyes.

"Yes, you must be right."

"Do you want to be scolded?"

"No, no… I don't."

Seeing Eleris slightly frown, Lucinil quickly straightened up.

Eleris took an interest in the labyrinth built beneath the Demon King's castle.

It was a labyrinth that constantly reconfigured itself, causing people to wander. From the beginning, there was no exit.

Eleris placed a large book on the table.

"I thought there would naturally be a grimoire capable of creating this labyrinth since this place is the real exit of the labyrinth, and sure enough, there was one."

[Quantum Maze]

Quantum mechanics…?

Is that even possible…?

Magical quantum science or something like that…?

What even is that?

At times like these, Lucinil's way of thinking is the best.

Just accept it as it is.

—---

"There seems to be no better magic for maze design than this," Eleris said.

"Who could have thought of such a thing…" Lucinil marveled.

Eleris and Lucinil couldn't help but admire the grimoire of the Quantum Maze as they skimmed through it. Of course, I couldn't understand anything just by looking at the complex magic circles and formulas.

And the labyrinth that blocked the path to this bunker.

"It appears to be a complex magical device combining numerous spells. A barrier-like form is used to protect against external interference, while dimensional magic is used for the internal structure, which sends all incoming people on different paths. Within, magic crafting constantly regenerates and reconstructs the structure and traps, and a mixture of summoning magic and alchemy is used to generate the monsters inside."

"Honestly, with just this one spell, I could last for 10 years, right?"

"Well, that's assuming we understand and construct it properly."

"True enough."

It was not a simple spell for designing a labyrinth, but the highest-grade maze consisting of numerous complex magics.

From the beginning, the spell was designed to have no exit, so all efforts to find one were inevitably futile.

Every time someone entered, the dungeon formed randomly. Surprisingly, the concept was not entirely unfamiliar to me.

"Wouldn't Cantus Magna be interested in this Quantum Maze itself?"

"It's not an impossibility."

The magical fields used to construct this maze were immense, making it a perfect spell for Cantus Magna to covet.

Originally, it was a spell designed to make intruders wander until they died, but depending on the design, it could also make people wander for a while before allowing them to escape.

There was no absolute necessity for casualties. As Eleris said, the more survivors there were, the more the rumors of an endless labyrinth would spread. It could be designed to provide some with prearranged rewards, leading them to believe even greater treasures lay deeper within.

"To what extent is there a risk of failure?"

Of course, we shouldn't be overly trusting. Nothing is absolute in this world, so even a maze without an exit could be breached, whether through internal or external means.

Lucinil answered my question.

"There's no physical method, neither from the inside nor the outside. It also seems impossible through magical means unless you discover specific conditions."

"So, it's difficult, anyway?"

"Yes, and besides, the labyrinth itself is not designed to devour people, but rather to tease them a bit before releasing them. Those who truly uncover the nature of this maze would be very few. From the beginning, the labyrinth was not designed to kill people but to divert them from their desired destination."

The magic of the Quantum Maze itself was already extremely powerful and mysterious, making it likely that Cantus Magna would be interested.

And numerous other spellbooks that would be scattered as bait.

It was unavoidably nerve-wracking.

This was a huge risk.

If we and the Black Order were completely stripped of everything by Cantus Magna, it could even hasten the completion of Akasha. No one knows what would happen then.

Feeling anxious but unable to know anything for certain, I watched Eleris and Lucinil examine the spellbooks.

—---

Eleris returned to the fortress of Epiaux, while Lucinil was to contact the Black Order with Antirianus.

The artificially created dungeon, with the original owner, the Lich, being forced to cooperate, was to be overseen by one person from the Order and our own Antirianus.

From now on, I don't have to worry. If Cantus Magna were to arrive, we might have to face an all-out battle between the two factions.

In reality, if such an event were to occur, I wouldn't be of much help.

The tomb of the lich discovered in the Darklands.

And the labyrinth that will soon be constructed there.

Could rumors about it spread all the way to the Imperial Capital?

I cannot tell how long it will take for Cantus Magna to take the bait.

All I can do now is wait.

And there is another piece of good news.

Charlotte no longer requires any further intervention.

"The research is going well, but the content is so complex that it's difficult to analyze."

I had this conversation with Charlotte as we drank tea together in the B-class dormitory. I now know that my research on the Soul Absorption spell won't be of any help to her.

Lucinil has not only read books but has also conducted many experiments, so she must have some knowledge.

Charlotte is now fine. She just needs to accept that she has become one with the Demon King.

In other words, there are now two Demon Kings in this world.

Me.

And Charlotte, who has merged with the spirit of the previous Valier.

She doesn't have horns, but can Charlotte really use the power to control demons?

She is not as proficient in magic as the Demon King, but she can use the power of shadows, which is a power intrinsic to the Demon King.

As I lack such power, it must have been a unique ability possessed only by the previous Demon King Valier.

I am glad to know that Charlotte's condition has improved, and she seems pleased to think that the Soul Absorption spell can stabilize her condition.

How can I help Charlotte accept that her power occasionally eroding her is not a problem at all?

"…"

Charlotte's complexion darkens as she looks beyond the terrace.

In that direction, I can see Liana and Cliffman running on the promenade.

The revolutionary forces have fallen into the hands of Owen de Gatmora, and in reality, into the hands of the royal family.

Charlotte must know that Liana's burning desire for revenge is misguided.

Regardless of her decision to hate the current Demon King, Liana is just being deceived.

Charlotte didn't offer any explanation to me.

"By the way, we'll soon become seniors."

Charlotte forced a smile and said so.

The winter break, entangled with various events, is finally drawing to a close.

We will become second-year students.

And the first-year students will arrive.

Honestly, I have no interest in first-year students. I have too many things to think about to engage in a senior-junior relationship.

"I wonder what kind of kids they'll be?"

However, I liked seeing Charlotte's curious and smiling face, wondering what the new students would be like.

But somehow.

Her smile seemed a little bit awkward.

—---

The end of the winter break was fast approaching.

Everyone's desire to become stronger was fueled by different flames. Some were driven by revenge, others by the desire to help with that revenge, and still others by the determination to protect something.

Close combat majors generally had it good in that respect.

-Clang!

"Kuh!"

"Your power is still unfamiliar to you, Ludwig. If you don't exercise restraint when using it, you'll harm your body."

"Yes, sir!"

It was convenient that our instructor, Saviolin Turner, was always available to teach us.

Now there were four of us who could use Magic Body Strengthening: me, Ellen, Cliffman, and Ludwig.

Initially, only Ludwig persistently bothered Saviolin Turner, but we all eventually began learning swordsmanship from her.

In Ellen's case, her schedule was complicated by the Miss Temple Contest, so she couldn't receive instruction. She didn't have much time to meet Saviolin Turner or spar with her due to various other commitments.

This time, only those capable of Magic Body Strengthening were present for inspection, so Scarlett wasn't there.

Of course, there were levels of proficiency in Magic Body Strengthening, and both Cliffman and Ludwig were still rough and clumsy in their use of it.

Saviolin Turner had initially treated Ludwig as a novice and went easy on him.

But then, unexpectedly, Ludwig awakened to Magic Body Strengthening, and Cliffman joined him. Recognizing their exceptional talent, Saviolin Turner's teachings became much more serious.

With a major battle's timing unknown, nurturing talent was deemed necessary, even if Saviolin Turner wasn't an official Temple teacher.

"Don't neglect what you can see by focusing only on Magic Body Strengthening. Pay attention to both the visible and the invisible."

"Don't use your magic too casually. No one has an infinite amount of magic. It's not the absolute amount of magic that's important, but the precision and finesse in its use. With the same power, depending on its finesse, you can either break a rock or only hurt your hand."

"The physical defense provided by Magic Body Strengthening is different from the barriers used by mages. They construct their defenses as efficiently as possible, which is why they use magic and casting. But the defense gained from Magic Body Strengthening is derived from the pure release of power. Remember that the same amount of magic can't compare to a magical barrier in terms of defense. There are situations when you can take a hit and when you shouldn't, and investing too much power in defense will ultimately deplete your stamina."

"In a situation where Magic Body Strengthening is assumed, swordsmanship must be reevaluated from the ground up. There are times when you must allow what was once strictly forbidden and times when you must thrust with intent, yet there are still attacks that mustn't be allowed. Assess the weight and focus of your opponent's attacks. After all, the purpose of swordsmanship is to take your opponent's life."

"You're still inexperienced with Magic Body Strengthening, Ludwig. We'll have to proceed to the next stage once you're more familiar with it."

"I'll try a little harder."

"No, the problem that arises from excessive use of Magic Body Strengthening is not muscle pain. When I say rest, it's not a suggestion, it's an order. Rest."

"Y-yes… Yes."

Saviolin Turner was giving Ludwig and Cliffman a slightly more detailed explanation than the brief comments she usually threw out.

Of course, there were limits to what she could teach due to her own inexperience with Magic Body Strengthening.

"You're very familiar with it. Your skill is improving incredibly fast, Reinhardt."

"Good. That's good. Can you manage fine adjustments in output as well? Like doubling your defense compared to normal, then reducing it by half… Oh, you can. Excellent."

"Of course, your technique is still lacking, but your growth is remarkable, especially in Magic Body Strengthening, you're already at an expert level."

"In most situations, with your skills, it would be easy to deal with those who cannot use Magic Body Strengthening. However, there might be cases where you could still be bested by someone who doesn't know how to use it… Hmm, but that would only happen at a beginner's level, so you wouldn't have to worry about it. My apologies, I've said something unnecessary. Forget about it."

"You'll become a Swordmaster in no time."

Master?

Your praise is a bit overwhelming, you know?

Her attitude towards me had changed somewhat, but she still showed a strong favoritism towards me.

"…"

Ellen watched me and Turner silently.

—---

Today's practice was for those who could use Magic Body Strengthening only.

The location was a B-class training arena.

Ludwig went first, followed by Cliffman, and then me.

Ellen was last.

We all sparred until we were completely exhausted, and the three of us sat against the wall of the training arena, waiting for the final round to begin.

"Haah… I still have a long way to go."

Ludwig wiped his sweat with a towel draped around his neck, drinking water from his canteen.

“…Indeed."

Cliffman muttered in agreement, dazed.

Although he had awakened his Magic Body Strengthening, it was clear that he wasn't as good as me, who had received high praise, and he wouldn't be as good as Ellen over there.

And then there was the Demon King.

Ludwig and Cliffman probably thought that the Demon King would be more threatening than Saviolin Turner, who stood before us like an absolute being.

"Let's do our best."

Ludwig calmly said this to Cliffman, who wore a slightly flustered expression.

The two had little in common. Ludwig had a carefree personality.

However, now they shared a mutual enmity towards the Demon King.

"Uh… Yeah. Let's."

Cliffman nodded in response to Ludwig's words.

The Demon King united humanity.

The existence of an enemy is an important mechanism for fostering unity.

Just as I had used that, so had Bertus. I felt a complicated mixture of emotions watching such arrangements take effect even in these small relationships.

I watched the confrontation between Ellen and Turner.

Observing the blue waves of mana engulfing Ellen's body, Turner silently focused her strength.

Thwack!

Clang!

Turner parried and deflected Ellen's relentless sword strikes.

She brushed aside the thrusts, repelled the slashes, and didn't even react to the feints.

Without taking a single step, Turner withstood Ellen's onslaught in her place.

And I knew this well, having crossed swords with Ellen countless times.

Naturally, Ellen didn't rely solely on her sword. With a one-handed sword stance, she would guide her opponent's blade and then grab their collar or use a kick with her empty hand.

As Ellen extended her left hand to grab Turner's collar, seeing the trajectory of Turner's sword that had diverted her own thrust to the right.

Her right hand was blocked. So, she aimed for the brief moment when Turner couldn't respond.

However, just as Ellen's left hand was empty, so was Turner's.

As Turner tried to catch Ellen's approaching left wrist with her left hand, Ellen

quickly lunged at her.

Fake upon fake upon fake.

In other words, it wasn't just a mere lunge, but she literally flung her body towards Turner, as if almost embracing her.

Bam!

"Ouch!"

"!"

"!"

"?"

Ellen headbutted Turner's forehead.

Thud!

Unprepared for this, Turner fell backward onto her rear, clutching her forehead with her mouth agape.

"????"

'What just happened?'

'What did I just experience?'

'No, who does that?'

'What is this?'

'What is she doing?'

A mix of complex emotions surfaced on Turner's face.

Ellen had won a round with an unexpected headbutt.

It's true that she caught her off guard.

But somehow…

I was dumbfounded, not expecting Ellen to pull off such a move.

CHAPTER 380

Turner's face was flustered, but she soon shook it off and looked at Ellen.

"Under the premise of using Magic Body Strengthening on each other, it's impossible to take the opponent's life with a mere shove. Of course, it was a bit startling, though…"

Initially, Turner hadn't anticipated that Ellen would resort to a shove, and even if it had been a real battle, she knew that such a move wouldn't have been particularly effective.

If Turner had been using her Magic Body Strengthening properly, Ellen's shove would have been a reckless and desperate tactic, placing her in the hands of a more skilled opponent.

Turner stuttered, taken aback when Ellen suddenly used such a lowly tactic.

What to say…

Despite being a brave younger sibling with exceptional abilities, could she really do that?

It was a sort of complacency born from trust.

"…I thought I wouldn't stand a chance unless I tried something like that."

At those words, Turner closed her mouth for a moment.

She had come up with this plan because she felt she had no other choice and would have lost with one hundred percent certainty otherwise.

Indeed, she had managed to land a hit.

'Uh… '

'Well, I guess so…?'

She seemed to reluctantly agree.

"Your attempt to exploit my weak point was good. After all, I couldn't counter it. But don't rely too much on such tactics. That being said… it was an excellent move, and I can't deny I fell for it."

Although it had been an unexpected attack, she acknowledged Ellen's cunning with a tone of admiration.

It was the epitome of an adult's response.

"I apologize."

Ellen bowed her head to Turner, seemingly believing her action had been rude.

She had done it because there seemed to be no other way to handle the situation without resorting to the element of surprise.

What to say…

It was somewhat surprising to see her pull off such a cute stunt.

Of course, if it hadn't been Turner, the shove would have broken her nose.

"There's no need to apologize. Discovering tactics to deal with opponents you can't face head-on is also a skill."

"…Yes."

Though Turner's words were kind, they ultimately grated on Ellen's nerves. Of course, Turner seemed unaware of this.

From the start, someone of her caliber wouldn't need to adjust her level to converse with others, let alone spar.

"Let's try again."

As if implying that such surprise tactics wouldn't work this time, Turner pointed her practice sword at Ellen.

"Yes."

As though vowing not to use such shallow tactics again, Ellen began her standoff with Turner.

Unsurprisingly,

Ellen was defeated.

Of course, there are degrees of defeat.

Ellen's performance wasn't as pitiful as being toyed with like the three of us.

—---

In contrast to the first round, where Turner had been caught off guard by Ellen's shove, neither of them attempted such a move again.

Therefore, the outcome of the five practice duels was a series of defeats for Ellen.

Of course, a fierce exchange of blows ensued. Turner wasn't giving it her all to gauge Ellen's ability, but that only made it harder for her to find an opening in Ellen's defense.

After five practice bouts, Turner looked at us.

"Everyone except Ellen and Reinhardt, leave."

At her words, Cliffman and Ludwig looked slightly bewildered, but seeing that Turner wasn't joking, they left the training hall.

She sent them away, leaving me behind.

I had an idea of what Turner was planning.

"Now, bring 'that' out."

"…"

"I want to see your true skills."

This was the first time Saviolin Turner would witness the abilities of Ellen Artorius.

Ellen hadn't participated in the tournament, and she wasn't an official fencing instructor.

A practice match was just that. Just as Turner couldn't get serious, Ellen wouldn't fight with gritted teeth either.

As the current strongest swordsman in the empire, she seemed intent on determining Ellen's true abilities.

Without a word, Ellen summoned Lament into her right hand.

Ellen possessed another sacred artifact, but she had only told me about it and hadn't brought it out yet.

Blue magical power gathered around the wooden practice sword Turner wielded.

The wooden sword would shatter or be cut upon contact with Lament.

The mark of a Swordmaster. Aura Blade.

Ellen stared intently at the magical power flowing through Turner's sword.

She was a being who transcended even Swordmasters. Saviolin Turner, with a serious expression, stared back at Ellen as if to say this was no longer a game.

"Fight as if you intend to kill me."

The situation was very similar to what had happened with Cliffman not long ago, but it was entirely different.

It was fine to fight with the intent to kill.

Because you could never actually kill me.

That was the meaning behind it.

"Yes."

Ellen took a deep breath as she stared at Saviolin Turner.

She wouldn't hesitate. Even if she fought with all her might, Ellen knew Turner would stand a chance.

Surrounded by magical power, Ellen charged at Saviolin Turner with Lament in hand.

-Clang!

The sound of the Aura Blade and Lament colliding echoed through the training hall, creating a shockwave that seemed to rip through the air.

But it wasn't just the shockwave.

"!"

Simply making contact with the Aura Blade caused Ellen's hands, gripping Lament, to be flung upwards as if being launched into the sky.

Her chest was left wide open.

Turner didn't miss the opportunity.

-Swoosh!

"Argh…!"

Ellen gasped as Turner's left fist drove directly into her solar plexus.

"Guh… Huh…!"

As Ellen clutched her chest, gasping for breath, with her Magic Body Strengthening dispelled, Turner looked at her calmly.

"The Aura Blade isn't just a sharp sword. It can freely manipulate magical shockwaves, so merely making contact can cause a powerful counterforce."

"Ugh… Ugh…"

"I meant to make you lose your grip on the sword, but you held on. I'll commend you

for that."

It was a given that Ellen would be no match, but I was still shocked to see her reduced to such a state in a single blow.

"Huff… huff…"

Turner looked down at Ellen with cold eyes.

"You are strong and will grow even stronger."

"…"

"Just as the foundation of swordsmanship must change the moment you use Magic Body Strengthening, it must change once again the moment you use an Aura Blade. Therefore, you cannot face your opponent in the same way as before if they are a Swordmaster."

"…"

"I will teach you how to confront a Swordmaster when you are not one, how to confront an Archmage, monsters, demons, demonkin, and even armies."

Up until now, Turner had spoken to Ludwig, Cliff, and myself at our level. She had taught us what we needed to do.

But now.

For Ellen, Turner suddenly began teaching her how to face a Swordmaster.

This must be because Turner had discovered potential in Ellen during their sparring session.

"Rise, Ellen Artorius."

"…"

Ellen kept her gaze fixed on the floor of the training ground, catching her breath.

"You have no freedom to be weak."

One must be strong.

In order to protect what is precious.

If one has taken on a burden, they must endure any level of cruelty.

Slowly, Ellen stood up. The light in Ellen Artorius' eyes had not died.

The Empire's strongest knight was sincerely trying to teach her something.

Her eyes were filled with the determination to learn.

Saviollin Turner stared expressionlessly at Ellen.

'If only it wasn't these youngsters, but me instead.'

'How wonderful that would be.'

'Why did the gods choose you as the adversary of the Demon King…?'

'Why must you be the ones to get hurt…?'

'Do I still have no role to play…?'

Such emotions could be read from Turner's expression.

"Let's begin."

"…Yes."

In the midst of sorrow.

She seemed to sense a sad fate for the two of us.

—---

Turner appeared anxious. As if she believed that if we didn't get stronger quickly during any moment of respite, we might be killed in vain when we truly needed our strength.

In the original work, Turner took charge of Ludwig and Ellen, the holders of sacred artifacts, after the Gate incident had already occurred. At that time, Turner had been rough with Ludwig, but she had no choice but to pay less attention to Ellen. Back then, Ellen was already quite complete, and Ludwig had many shortcomings.

However, at this point in time, there was a sense of urgency, but still some room to breathe.

That's why Turner was focusing on Ellen, who had even greater potential for growth. Moreover, the current owner of Alsebringer had not yet been determined.

Turner had informed Ludwig and Cliffman of what needed to be corrected at this stage.

However, she told Ellen that she would teach her how to fight.

Swordmaster, Archmage, Demonkin, Demon, and the art of battling armies.

I intend to teach the method of killing something.

"Reinhardt, come here as well."

And I too possess a sacred relic.

As if to say that I am no exception, Saviolin Turner stands Ellen and me in front of her and speaks.

"What is a Master Class?"

"Someone who can use an Aura Blade."

"Then, what is this Aura?"

"I understand it to be the ability to do Magic Body Strengthening beyond the physical body, even up to the level of a battlefield aura."

"I see."

She nods her head as if it's an ordinary answer and there's nothing wrong with it.

"Then, if your main weapons are fists and feet, would you be considered a Master Class if you could wrap magic power around your fists and feet?"

If one can enhance their primary weapon with magic power, they are considered a Master Class.

So, if a close-quarters combatant specializes in enhancing their magical power, would they become a Master Class the moment they can do so? Since they know how to enhance their main weapon with magic power.

“…I don't think so."

Of course, it's not.

"That's right. Usually, if one can do Magic Body Strengthening on objects other than their body, they are considered a Master Class. However, in reality, it's a little different."

Saviolin Turner, with her practice sword laid down, gathers blue mana. Both Ellen and Turner are clad in Magic Body Strengthening.

While both of them are enhancing their bare bodies with Magic Body Strengthening, the appearance of Ellen and Turner is slightly different.

Ellen, who initially used a very explosive Magic Body Strengthening, can now use a more refined one. However, Turner's enhancement felt extremely controlled.

If the sensation emanating from Ellen's body is a blue light, only a hazy glow could be felt from Turner's body.

Extremely refined Magic Body Strengthening.

The faint light minimized unnecessary consumption, giving the impression that the Magic Body Strengthening itself was optimized.

"A Master Class refers to cases where the activeness of Magic Body Strengthening has developed to the utmost extreme. Come closer and try maintaining your Magic Body Strengthening."

At Turner's command, Ellen stands in front of her.

Turner had called her over as if she was going to show something amazing, but what she ended up doing was a bit surprising.

She placed her right middle and index fingers together, then aimed at Ellen's forehead.

It was a flick, commonly referred to as a forehead flick.

"???"

Questions flooded Ellen's expression.

A Grandmaster's forehead flick, of all things.

Did she intend to kill Ellen?

-Thud!

However, Turner's flick did make a sound on Ellen's forehead, but Ellen didn't seem hurt at all. Her head was just slightly pushed back.

But.

The sound of that flick was a bit strange…

"It must have felt like metal striking metal, right?"

"Yes."

Ellen nods her head.

"That's the Magic Body Strengthening you guys do. Forming a powerful protective barrier, and enhancing physical abilities."

At our level, it doesn't amount to much more than that.

"Now, try taking this."

Turner prepared for another flick of her fingers.

This time, it was different.

Ellen stared at the flick Turner aimed at her forehead.

"…"

No.

Is this the first time I've seen her so frightened?

Look at her eyes trembling as she pretends not to be scared!

Ellen, scared out of her wits!

It's odd that a finger flick would be scarier than a punch.

I'd be scared of that too!

"…"

As Ellen's shoulders began to tremble slightly, Turner looked my way as if she couldn't continue.

"Uh… me?"

Am I really going to die?

My face turned pale as well.

Then.

"I'll just take the hit."

Suddenly, Ellen stopped trembling and spoke calmly. Her eyes were wide open, as if she'd made up her mind.

No.

Hey.

What does that make me?

"No, Miss, I'll take the hit and die."

If you take the hit for me, I'll have no choice but to do this!

I'm not sure I won't die, but I said it anyway. Turner looked back and forth between Ellen and me before lowering her finger.

“…On second thought, there's no need to hit you that hard. And it's not like I'm going to kill you."

Turner let out an embarrassed sigh and lowered her hand.

Both Ellen and I unknowingly let out a sigh of relief at the sight of that lethal finger.

"It's just, like that."

She flicked her finger into the air.

Bang!

Instead of a sound, a fierce noise like an explosion of gunpowder echoed from Turner's finger.

What did I just hear?

"The difference lies in the power of a Master Class Magic Body Strengthening."

"…”

Now, were you planning on applying that to my forehead?

Ellen stared at Turner with a questioning gaze.

"Um, well. I didn't do it, did I… Um."

Embarrassed, she avoided Ellen's gaze.

"How did you do that?"

"It's an offensive application of Magic Body Strengthening."

"Offensive application…?"

"Yes, you and Reinhardt are proficient in Magic Body Strengthening, but only to the extent of physical enhancement internally and obtaining defense through external magic discharge. This is the next level."

The mana gathered in her right hand seemed refined, but suddenly surged explosively from just her right hand, repeating a blazing, explosive-like appearance.

"Once you reach a certain level, it'll be possible to explosively release magic throughout your entire body. And then it becomes more specialized. From your whole body to just your right leg, your right arm, only the lower half of your right arm, and then just your hand, and then only your fingers."

Turner showed her index finger, and from it, a blue flame-like flicker of magical power danced.

Starting with defense, one becomes capable of explosively releasing magical power.

The range gradually narrows, starting from the entire body.

The more the magic is concentrated rather than radiating outwards, the greater its destructive power will be.

From Turner's fingers, seemingly enveloped in blue flames, the fire begins to gradually focus into a single point.

"Slowly, from your entire body to smaller units, become accustomed to concentrating the Magic Body Strengthening to an extreme point."

"Meticulously."

"Concentrate."

As Turner speaks these words, the flickering light around her fingers gradually begins to gather at her fingertips.

"Eventually, you'll be able to concentrate the Magic Body Strengthening only at your

fingertips like this."

"Right. And beyond this stage."

She grasps the practice sword she had set down.

The practice sword in her hand becomes gradually engulfed in blue flames, as if the concentrated magic at the tip of her finger has ignited it.

"When you reach the pinnacle of Magic Body Strengthening manipulation, such feats become possible."

A refined Magic Body Strengthening ability, so precise that it can strengthen with magic beyond the body's boundaries.

"That is the condition of the Master Class."

Once you can do that, you will have reached the Master Class.

CHAPTER 381

The Master Class Condition

The master class is achieved when one possesses extreme active enhancement of Magic Body Strengthening, to the extent that they can strengthen the object they hold.

With that said, we return to the original question.

In the end, it is true that the condition is to strengthen the weapon with Magic Body Strengthening.

As if knowing the doubts of Ellen and me, Turner clenched her fist.

"Although rare, there are masters who specialize in close combat techniques. Among them, those who can be called master class are the ones who can do this."

She extended her palm filled with Magic Body Strengthening into the air.

Krrrr!

The short-lived, flickering blue magical power from her palm gave the assurance that anything it touched would shatter into pieces.

"This, too, is not merely using the Magic Body Strengthening within for defense but briefly releasing and exploding it, making it the pinnacle of Magic Body Strengthening control. Of course, some of them go a step further and directly emit the Magic itself. From here on, their paths become completely different."

The so-called master class of close combat techniques also applies only to those who have gone far beyond the stage of using Magic Body Strengthening for defense.

The training methods of martial artists and sword masters are different.

In other words, training to strengthen the weapon one holds with Magic Body Strengthening, and pursuing the limit of Magic Body Strengthening through martial

arts techniques, belong to different genres.

Ellen tilted her head.

"Then, did you receive training in both?"

Turner had demonstrated the techniques used by the masters of martial arts while using the Aura Blade.

Her face reddened slightly at the mention of having trained in both completely different paths.

"Um… No, not really… I've only trained with the sword. Of course, I'm familiar with other weapons like spears and bows, but my knowledge of martial arts is relatively shallow."

"Then how did you do that just now?"

"…"

Her face reddened, and she hesitated slightly.

"When one reaches the extreme in a certain field, understanding of other fields to some extent follows…"

I am a great grandmaster, so I naturally know how to do things even in fields I'm not familiar with.

She struggled to say those words.

Thinking about it, Turner had said that she was not used to teaching others. So, even though she was a teacher at the temple, teaching was still a new experience for her.

"You're amazing."

"…"

Watching the red-faced Saviolin Turner at Ellen's honest admiration was quite an amusing sight.

"It's interesting to hear the words I used to hear from my teachers at the temple coming from the mouths of you students now that we're back here…"

In the end, she let out a bitter laugh and a deep sigh.

"What I'm trying to say is that you've become familiar with using Magic Body Strengthening for defense, so now it's time to move on to the next step. And whether you're a martial artist or use a weapon, improving the autonomy of Magic Body Strengthening through training is a common goal."

Up until now, they had used Magic Body Strengthening to enhance their physical strength and endurance. However, now they needed to learn how to use Magic Body Strengthening itself offensively.

They needed to learn how to transform the magical armor that had protected their bodies into a weapon, like a spear.

As they pushed this to the limit, they would eventually reach a level where they could overlay Magic Body Strengthening onto martial arts, and naturally, earn the title of Master Class.

"But even if an enemy at the Swordmaster level appears, you won't be able to face them. Those who awaken their Magic Body Strengthening are few, and those who reach the Master Class are even fewer. It's unlikely that this moment will come to you any time soon."

Even though they were special, becoming a Swordmaster in just a few days was impossible.

That's why Turner had originally told Ellen.

Instead of teaching them how to become a Swordmaster, she would teach them how to face one.

"A Swordmaster can't be challenged by ordinary people, skilled martial artists, or even those who know how to strengthen themselves with Magic Body Strengthening. It's the same for mages. Most offensive spells will be blocked by their Magic Body Strengthening defenses, and spells that could have an effect take too long to cast, giving the Swordmaster time to either close the distance and kill the mage or escape the spell's reach."

No matter how exceptional their talents, they couldn't hope to face a Swordmaster.

"There's only one best method."

She said quietly.

"Surprise them."

She offered advice more fitting for an assassin.

"No matter how powerful a Master Class is, they can't maintain their Magic Body Strengthening at all times, and there will always be moments when they are vulnerable. They can't always be sensitive to their surroundings."

A surprise attack.

It was a ruthless strategy, but they had no other choice. The reality of her words was so harsh that they couldn't help but be taken aback.

"Remember that throughout history, more Master Class individuals have been assassinated than have died honorably in battle."

Turner's advice proved to be far more important than they had imagined.

Killing through traps, ambushes, or while they slept was more common than in a head-to-head battle or on the battlefield.

"What if we have to face them head-on?"

At Ellen's question, Turner answered seriously.

"If that's possible, then run away."

She wasn't joking.

"What if we can't run away?"

The conversation seemed like a scripted exchange, but it was necessary.

If they couldn't run away, did that mean they had to face them head-on?

"If you can't run away, then surrender. Relying on the enemy's mercy offers a better chance of survival than trying to fight them."

Fighting a Swordmaster was nearly as bad as surrendering. She wasn't mocking them with her serious expression.

She was genuinely discussing what they should do if a Master Class intent on killing them appeared before their eyes.

If a surprise attack isn't possible, a head-on confrontation is forbidden.

If one can't even flee, it's better to surrender.

"What if our opponent is someone who has absolutely no intention of sparing my life?"

This time, it was my question.

From the start, she was telling us not to fight against a Master Class.

Surprise attack, escape, surrender.

When all other options disappear, and there's no other way but a direct confrontation, what should we do?

"From now on, I will teach you how to deal with that. But you must not become arrogant, thinking that learning this will allow you to defeat a Master Class."

Turner was utterly serious.

"You cannot kill an elephant with a toothpick."

That was obvious.

"Remember that I'm teaching you this so that you can stab an elephant in the eye with a toothpick and then run away. Of course, even that won't be easy."

Just in case.

She wants us to survive for as long as possible.

We don't know when a battle will come, and we don't know who will target us and from where.

So, she said she'd teach us how to deal with situations when we face powerful opponents or tough circumstances.

Swordmaster.

Archmage.

Demon.

Devil.

Monster.

And an army.

It's not about winning.

It's about confronting.

She wanted to teach us how to survive in situations we might face someday.

—---

In the event of encountering a Swordmaster and being forced into a direct confrontation, the way for us to survive.

Turner assessed our chances of winning as close to zero, saying it would be better for us to surrender.

"Use obstacles. The senses of a Swordmaster surpass those of ordinary humans, but the most reliable sensory organ for humans is vision. Scatter sand or throw large objects to obstruct their view."

Somehow.

Petty tactics were being suggested.

"Use noise. After vision, the most important sensory organ is hearing. When vision is blocked, it becomes the most active sense. Alternatively, escaping to a noisy place is another option."

Scatter dirt and create a commotion.

The advice of a Grandmaster seemed too practical, and the thought of actually doing such things was somewhat…

Depressing.

"Assuming an enclosed space, setting a fire is the best option. Fire provides both visual obstruction due to smoke and noise. Also, breathing is fair to everyone. They may be able to hold their breath for a while, but not forever. While heat may not threaten a Swordmaster, inhaling smoke is dangerous for them too."

She taught us not how to confront, but how to escape.

I know it makes sense, but…

As the hope of humanity, I'm learning to scatter dirt, create a commotion, and set fires.

"…"

"…"

Both Ellen and I had expressions that showed we had no idea what was going on.

Turner punched Ellen when she found an opening, but if it had been a real battle, Ellen would have died at that moment.

"Do not cross swords with it."

"Do not try to parry it either."

"Avoid all of its strikes."

You must avoid them.

It sounded simple, but was it possible?

"And do not attempt to attack. You won't be able to handle the power within the sword. The moment your weapon touches the enemy, the same thing will happen as if you had clashed with the sword."

You must not try to attack either. If you think of it as a mere feint and aim for the enemy's neck, the recoil will twist your wrist or bounce back.

In the end, it was all about focusing on escaping and not confronting the enemy.

"In normal circumstances, yes, that's what it means."

Turner looks at the two of us as if she has another story to tell.

"I sent Cliffman and Ludwig away because listening to this story would be useless for them. Of course, it was also to hide the fact that you two are the holders of the relics."

Our common point.

We both possess relics in the form of swords.

"As you've experienced, Lament was repelled just by clashing with the Aura Blade."

"Yes."

"If it had been an ordinary sword, it would have shattered just from hitting the flat of the Aura Blade, not the edge. The Aura Blade is a powerful weapon in itself, with an enchantment that cannot be compared to any magic. Unless a sword is made of extremely strong material or protected by potent magic, it is safe to say that there is no sword capable of facing the Aura Blade head-on."

“…I see."

It's not just about being sharp. Depending on the skill of the Aura Blade user, they can cause a powerful backlash by exploding the power within the sword when the swords collide.

Ordinary swords don't just get cut by the edge; they're shattered just by hitting the flat.

She alternates her gaze between me and Ellen.

"Lament and Tiamata are relics. They won't break or chip against the Aura Blade. Plus, if you lose them, they are bound to your souls, so you can summon them at any time. That means you can at least meet the basic conditions to fight against the unreasonable power of the Aura Blade: not losing your weapon."

Unless you have a very powerful magical weapon or a relic, you cannot even exchange blows with a Master class.

"But it's only a matter of enduring it. The moment you try to face the sword directly, a gap will form due to the backlash, and that will be the end."

After telling Ellen that, Turner looks at me.

"Reinhardt, your situation may be different."

"Different?"

"Assuming you can use Tiamata's divine power. If you overlay your sword with divine power, it will protect you and Tiamata from the Aura Blade's backlash to a great extent."

A sword not coated in magic, but enhanced with divine power, and myself. Does this mean that the immense destructive power of the Aura Blade will have less of an impact?

I had not faced an Aura Blade myself, but I thought I understood what Turner was saying.

Indeed.

I could withstand a few rounds against the monstrous attack of Riverrier Lanze, who had also enhanced his sword with Divine power, entwined with his own.

Riverrier Lanze was not a Swordmaster, but I did not think he was inferior to one.

After all, even the most common Swordmasters are not monsters that can survive a stab to the heart.

I could face him partly because of external conditions, but the immense Divine power of Tiamata itself had also been a great help.

As for dealing with an Aura Blade.

I could handle it to some extent.

"Assuming you can use Divine power, you can withstand the swordplay of an Aura Blade. And Ellen."

"Yes."

"With Lament, you can penetrate the Magic Body Strengthening defense of a Swordmaster. Of course, the chances of piercing are higher."

A sword with the sharpness of an Aura Blade, as if it were an innate passive ability.

Ellen cannot control it herself, so using it freely like the all-purpose Aura Blade of Saviolin Turner is impossible.

However, its sharpness and cutting power are overwhelming.

"In such a situation, if you two are together, the chances of survival are higher."

Tiamata can endure but not kill, Lament can't endure but can kill.

While I endure, Ellen pierces.

Without the two of us together, a fight against a Master-class would be impossible.

"If you're not together, Reinhardt, you should block the enemy's attack as much as possible, obstruct their view, and then escape after assessing the situation."

"Ellen, the same goes for you. An opponent who is only watching you will not give you an opening. If you try to clumsily pierce their heart, you'll be the one to suffer. So, carefully dodge the enemy's sword and inflict minor wounds, or make them aware that your sword is a threat. The enemy will be flustered, and that will give you time to escape."

In the end, Turner's conclusion was not to think about facing a Swordmaster if they

were not together.

CHAPTER 382

The training we received from Turner was incredibly long, stretching on even after the sun had set.

It included one-on-one sessions with Ellen, one-on-one sessions with me, and even scenarios where the two of us teamed up to face Turner.

Ellen wielded the Lament, and I fought with the Tiamata against her.

Of course, we couldn't even come close to matching her. It would have been difficult enough if Turner were merely a Swordmaster, but she had long surpassed that level. Even on the rare occasion when the Lament's attack managed to touch Turner's body, it would simply be repelled by her counterforce.

How much time had passed before we were utterly battered and bruised?

"That's enough for today. Go back and rest. We'll meet here at the same time tomorrow," Turner said, seeming determined to continue supervising our training unless she had other pressing matters.

Both Ellen and I were so exhausted that we needed to receive healing at the priest's office.

The sun had long since set, and it was well past our usual bedtime.

This training was to prepare us for a potential battle against a much stronger opponent. Ellen wore a serious expression.

Was she contemplating the possibility of facing an overwhelming demon?

"I'm hungry."

"…"

Seriously, all she could think about was food. Ellen said this while staring at me intently.

"Alright, let's eat something."

Although we were usually quite active, today it was less about the amount of exercise and more about the damage we had taken. We needed to have a hearty meal and rest.

We would have to face another grueling day tomorrow.

—---

Ellen and I cooked and devoured four large pieces of beef sirloin. It wasn't the kind of meal one should eat late at night, but then again, none of the food we made and ate at night was particularly suitable for nighttime consumption.

-Om nom nom nom

She always ate a lot, but when she was hungry, she would eat even more.

She consumed a great deal without appearing gluttonous. She continuously nibbled with her small mouth, never slowing down from her initial pace.

Our routine had been going on for quite some time now.

Spending the entire day training with Ellen, only to cook and eat something together at night.

Sometimes we would skip a few days, but this was still our most common activity in the temple.

Eating a large meal with Ellen before going to bed.

"Y'know, I've been thinking. Our real talent might be eating a ton of food right before bed without getting acid reflux or any other stomach-related issues."

Isn't it a special talent to eat so much before bed without suffering from any gastrointestinal problems?

In a way, weren't Ellen and I the strongest in the world when it came to our digestive systems?

"…?"

Judging by her clueless expression, she didn't understand what I was talking about. Perhaps she would never experience any internal organ-related illnesses in her lifetime.

In the end, Ellen consumed three of the sirloin pieces, while I ate one.

"Do you want more?"

"No, I'm good."

Seemingly satisfied, Ellen shook her head. I never thought I'd see the day when she would refuse food.

No, it wasn't that she refused it. She had already eaten three pieces, after all.

"Let's rest then. Even after receiving healing, there's a lingering feeling of psychological pain that doesn't go away."

Both Ellen and I had taken a hefty blow.

Still, Ellen would make dramatic movements to try to lessen the pain when struck, while I couldn't manage to do that.

I could sense the danger and the trajectory shown by my instincts, but I couldn't react to it.

The pain was bearable, but I was mentally exhausted and all I wanted was to rest quickly.

"I just realized something."

As I was about to get up from my seat, Ellen opened her mouth.

"What?"

"Come to think of it, if we do well, we might be able to handle a Master Class."

I couldn't help but be taken aback by her sudden remark.

"Suddenly?"

"Yeah, follow me."

Ellen got up from her seat and led me towards the training hall.

—---

I had a feeling about what Ellen intended to show me.

A cloak was draped over Ellen's shoulder as she led me to the A-Class dormitory's training hall.

It was Lapelt, the Cloak of the Sun God she had shown me before.

Ellen hadn't told Turner about the Cloak of the Sun God. Turner had said that even though it would be difficult to handle a Master Class under the premise that we were the owners of the relics, we could still manage to evade or escape somehow.

Ellen seemed to think that combining Lapelt into the equation would allow us to confront a Master Class.

But come to think of it, I didn't know what abilities the Cloak of the Sun God possessed.

"What does that do?"

It was a relic in the form of a cloak.

"Try throwing something at me."

"What? You want me to throw something?"

"Yeah, anything."

There was nothing much to throw here, but since there were practice swords lying around, I picked one up.

"You want me to throw this?"

"Yes."

I didn't think it would hurt her. Ellen was only wearing the cloak. Figuring nothing bad would happen, I threw the practice sword at her.

And then.

-Kwang!

Just before the practice sword touched Ellen's body, an explosion of flames erupted in mid-air, and the sword shattered into pieces.

“…What was that?"

What did I just witness?

The practice sword was blocked by a wall of flames in mid-air, just as if it had been intercepted automatically right before it hit her.

"Lapelt possesses the power of protection."

I had a hunch it was a relic related to defense.

However, this was not just any protection. The moment an attack landed, it would not only block the attack, but also cause a counter explosion of flames.

It was both defense and offense simultaneously.

There had definitely been occasions when Ellen and I had successfully attacked Turner while cooperating.

Saviolin Turner had a rebounding force on her sword, but also applied it to her own body. So, when we managed to land an attack, we would be thrown off by the tremendous shock to the point that our wrists would bend backward.

"Wait, so… that means… that thing…”

At my mumbled words, Ellen nodded.

"Right. It's not much different from what the teacher used."

Whether it was a surge of magical power or an explosion of flames, any attack would be met with a fierce rebound. The attacker would be counterattacked in the same manner.

The Lament that Ellen possessed functioned similarly to an Aura Blade in itself.

The Lapelt that Ellen held had capabilities akin to the Aura Armor used by master-class warriors.

The Sword of the Moon.

The Cloak of the Sun.

"Are you… essentially a Swordmaster then?"

"Well, I wouldn't say that, but it seems quite similar."

Thanks to the two relics, Ellen's situation wasn't much different from that of a Swordmaster.

Talk about luck.

This was incredibly frightening.

Of course, it's not necessarily Ellen who would benefit; anyone wielding those two relics could perform the two skills Swordmasters are known for. Naturally, whose hands they were in was of utmost importance.

If someone with the relics didn't possess Ellen's abilities, it would be difficult for them to use the relics effectively. It was uncertain how they would fare in a battle against a real Swordmaster, but in her current state, Ellen might be able to challenge a master-class warrior.

Even with the support of the overpowered artifacts known as relics, her rapid transformation into a monster had reached a point where she could potentially stand against a master-class opponent.

Moreover, Ellen hadn't yet unleashed the true power of the relics.

The true power of Tiamata is the explosive release of potent divine power. In my

case, it allows me to use divine power I shouldn't originally be able to access.

The true power of Alsebringer is the summoning of the war god Als.

The true powers of Lament and Lapelt were unknown to me.

However, even in their current state, the two relics possessed immense power.

Aura Blade and Aura Armor.

What would happen if Ellen, who already possesses both, truly reached the master-class and could actually use both powers? The power of the relics would also amplify, and there might not be anyone in the world who could stand against her.

Would I have to face such an Ellen as my enemy someday?

Before my frozen self, Ellen suddenly took off her cloak.

“…What are you doing?"

Ellen walked towards me and held out the cloak.

"I'll give it to you."

“…This?"

"Yes."

She offered it so calmly that I couldn't understand what she was doing for a moment.

Why would she give this to me?

"I think you'll need it more than I do."

Ellen smiled quietly.

She was giving up one of the two conditions that made her practically a Swordmaster without hesitation.

Because I needed it more.

In the end, that meant she was giving it to me because I was weaker.

Yes.

In reality, I needed it more. Many people would turn against me, and I would need a shield rather than a weapon to protect myself from them.

The Cloak of the Sun God would surely serve as that shield.

I had to accept it.

As Ellen said, this was truly something I needed. Ellen didn't know, but with this cloak alone, I would be able to overcome countless crises.

Ellen was smiling.

She seemed genuinely happy to be able to give me something.

Without explaining anything, without saying a word.

She always just gives to me. She's happy just by giving.

But I should accept it.

Even if it's a brief lapse in judgment, I know that accepting this would be the best course of action.

"No."

"…?"

"How can I accept this?"

I pushed the cloak that Ellen offered me back towards her.

"It's something your parents gave you because they were worried about you."

I couldn't accept such a thing. That's what I told her. Ellen must have been struggling with the decision as well. Giving me something that her parents had given her would be like disregarding their concerns.

Despite that, she decided to give it to me because she wished for my safety, but I refused.

"…"

Ellen, seemingly aware of how difficult my answer had been, furrowed her brow and recalled Lapelt.

"Still, thank you."

I hugged the somewhat deflated Ellen. At first, she seemed a little flustered, but then she hugged me back.

It was something I needed, but I didn't accept it.

I couldn't accept any more than this.

"I mean it."

Even to my ears, my voice trembled severely. I hoped she would understand my sincerity in not accepting it.

Would she know? What I had just given up?

"Me too, thank you."

As if to say she understood, Ellen whispered softly while hugging me.

[Special Achievement Unlocked - Turning Point of History 'Ellen Artorius']

[The future has changed significantly.]

[You have earned 1,000 Achievement Points.]

What?

The future has changed?

By not accepting Lapelt just now, somehow, the future has been altered.

I hugged Ellen a little tighter. I gently stroked her head as she trembled slightly in my embrace.

I couldn't know in what way it had changed.

But two assumptions were possible.

Either not accepting Lapelt would lead to my death.

Or.

By not accepting Lapelt.

Contrarily, I would survive in a situation where I should have died.

"Hey."

I quietly called out to Ellen.

“…Yes?"

"You know I really like you a lot, right?"

Ellen's body flinched significantly. She quietly buried her face in my chest.

"Yes."

Ellen added in a trembling voice.

"I like you, too… a lot."

We remained embraced for a long time.

CHAPTER 383

Ellen handed me the Lapelt, but I didn't accept it.

Just that act alone changed the future.

I had no idea how this would come back to affect me.

During the remaining winter break, the four of us who could do Magic Body Strengthening received training from Saviolin Turner.

After the training of Ludwig and Cliff was completed, Turner also taught Ellen and me intensively.

Considering that most of the things I had to worry about were out of my hands, and that getting stronger was my top priority, receiving guidance from Saviolin Turner was nothing but a good thing for me.

Even as I digested Turner's heavier-than-usual training sessions, various events took place.

Among them, two things were most important.

"It's complete?"

"Yes. The enhancement potion will enter the clinical phase, so I'll request an evaluation from the university lab, and the same goes for the magic power artifact."

Moonshine and the Power Cartridge were completed.

—---

I headed to the Magic Research Club with Harriet.

At the Magic Research Club, which was established during the second semester, we managed to complete two items before the end of winter break.

However, to ensure that these two artifacts function properly, we now have to entrust them to a senior lab for safety tests. This is not something that can be done at the junior club level.

Originally, these items were created in the chaotic aftermath of the Gate Incident.

In a situation akin to war, anything that could help in battle had to be used, so Moonshine and the Power Cartridge were immediately deployed.

However, even though the Demon King is in hiding now, we are in a relatively peaceful period. Even if the functions of the body enhancement potion and the Power Cartridge are revolutionary, they won't be approved for use until they have been thoroughly tested.

Of course, it is impossible to immediately determine the effectiveness of Moonshine, but in the case of the Power Cartridge, it was quite easy.

The Power Cartridge was an artifact that looked like a peculiarly designed necklace, with a blue magic stone the size of a fingertip encased in a metal cage.

"We decided to call it the Power Cartridge."

"That's fine."

The name of the artifact, like in the original work, was named by Adelia.

Adelia stared at the completed Power Cartridge in silence.

She seemed amazed and couldn't quite understand what she had created.

"We have already confirmed its stability, but it's disposable. We might be able to make it reusable through magic power charging, but then it would become larger, and the magic power stabilization device might become unstable."

The Power Cartridge is, as its name suggests, a disposable fuel container. Once all the magic power inside is used up, it's empty.

In the original work, it was disposable, but is it possible to make it reusable?

But there seems to be a problem with that.

“…Are you saying that this thing around the magic stone is the magic power stabilization device?"

"Yes."

Adelia nodded at my words.

The principle of the Power Cartridge may be beyond my comprehension, but its structure is simple.

It consists of a magic stone and a stabilization device that prevents the explosion of the magic stone.

"The external stabilization device can bear and regulate the instability of the magic stone's magic power when it is used like the magic power in the body. Naturally, the durability of the stabilizer decreases as magic is used more frequently. So, while it's possible to construct the device with a rechargeable magic stone, if it's used for too long, it will explode. The magic power in the cartridge will inevitably be used in combat, so having a magic stone replenishment device with the potential to explode during combat… it's meaningless."

Although it's possible to create something rechargeable, the problem is that the likelihood of explosion increases as it is used for a longer period of time.

Of course, I don't expect to reuse it anyway.

This invention alone is enough to turn the magic world upside down.

"Well done. You'll be remembered as a hero in history now."

"Huh? Is that so…?"

I looked at Harriet while telling Adelia.

Power Cartridge and Moonshine.

Harriet had said that whoever created such a thing would become a hero in history, which was nonsense. But in the end, it was created.

Even Adelia herself seemed to be unable to understand how she could make such a

thing, but she did.

"Wait, anyone would know you made it for real?"

Harriet muttered in disbelief at my enthusiastic gaze.

"Give me the subject, and I'll get you the money. You can't say that I didn't contribute anything."

Although I wasn't involved in the research itself, I had an absolute influence on creating the research environment. Of course, it's a bit funny that I didn't think I would get credit for making it before, but now I'm talking like this in the actual situation.

"Well, that's true, but…"

Harriet eventually had nothing to say and shut her mouth, as if sulking.

The Power Cartridge is complete.

Furthermore, it even added the possibility of reuse that was not in the original. The research paper seemed to be completed to be presented to Temple University, so Adelia will really be recorded in history as a sorceress who changed history during her high school days.

Adelia, and even Christina, who contributed more than Harriet, could also be recorded in history as even more talented sorceresses.

Of course, Adelia didn't work alone, so ultimately, all the members of the research group could become stars in the magic world.

But.

Is that really… a good thing?

As I pushed the research of the Magic Research Society forward, I became aware of other problems.

Later, I saw a demonstration of magic using the Power Cartridge's magic power.

The performer was Redina.

In the magic practice room, Redina summoned eighteen fireballs with the Power Cartridge attached to her neck and shot them off.

-Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom!

With her meager magical power, Redina could not even cast large-scale spells, but now she was firing off massive fireballs in an instant using no-casting.

She thought it would be exciting.

"I am a god! The god of magic! Bring it on!"

Watching the child who now claimed to be a god beyond dragons, it felt a bit dizzying.

But then again.

If that kid had a hundred power cartridges attached to her.

Wouldn't she actually be a god? She might be able to singlehandedly destroy the world, right? Of course, she couldn't possibly wear a hundred power cartridges on her body.

A million fireballs.

Just thinking about it, she was a crazy talent who could instantly summon them.

With the disadvantage of extremely low magical power gone, Redina might be the most dangerous mage in the world, right?

"You look great, senior," said Harriet, covering her mouth with a smile, as if Redina's excited hopping and launching fireballs at the dummy were adorable.

"I am a god, I tell you! Come out! Come out!"

Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!

"Isn't Senior Redina just too cute?"

Well, now.

It wasn't just you.

She had been firing spells to show that the cartridges wouldn't explode until all the magic power was used up.

After a while of crazily firing magic like a mad child, Redina came out of the laboratory, removing the dimmed cartridge when no more fireballs could be summoned.

"Huff… huff… I'm… I'm tired…"

"Well, of course you're tired after all that yelling."

"Right… right…"

It wasn't the magic power that was the problem, but rather her body getting tired from hopping around and firing spells. Redina dragged her exhausted body onto a chair.

Adelia was the chief researcher for power cartridges, but Redina was her assistant.

Thus, Redina also had a significant contribution to the development of power cartridges.

"So, junior, are you starting the research for my exclusive cartridge now? I'm ready whenever."

"We should be able to make a cartridge that can be used indefinitely soon."

Redina was overjoyed at the prospect of starting her exclusive cartridge research soon.

There was an impossible challenge, and they had achieved it.

That's why everyone's faces couldn't help but be happy.

—---

After checking the power cartridges, they checked Moonshine.

"If my theory is correct, the expected effects should appear. Of course, there should be no side effects, but we can't commercialize it right away since clinical trials are necessary. And we don't even know if it will be commercialized."

Christina said this, looking at the pink potion in the triangular flask.

Harriet looked at the triangular flask and said, "We've decided to call this Moonshine."

Just like in the original work, it was given the name Moonshine.

A potion that increases Magic Body Strengthening sensitivity and magical power. If power cartridges were for mages, this was for combat majors.

Most of the students who struggled with Magic Body Strengthening would open their eyes to it after drinking this, while those who already knew how to do Magic Body Strengthening would quickly become accustomed to it at a rapid pace.

No matter how you phrase it, it's doping in the end.

"Reinhardt, would you like to try this…?"

Anna brought me a pink liquid in a separate container.

"Ah, Anna! Stop giving Reinhardt strange things!"

Harriet was alarmed, but Anna slowly approached me.

It's supposed to be the same Moonshine, but the one she's giving is terrifying! Could she have mixed in something else?

"Don't drink that."

"No, don't!"

As if accustomed to it, Christina snatched the triangular flask from Anna's grasp and threw it away with a swift motion.

-Crash!

The flask shattered on the floor, and the liquid inside spread across the ground.

"Ch-Christina…!"

Harriet was more startled by Christina's sudden action.

But neither Anna nor Christina seemed to mind, as if it was a familiar event. Christina casually started cleaning up the broken flask and spilled liquid.

How often did this happen? And why does Anna seem so familiar with such treatment?

Anna is scary, but Christina is also scary in a different way.

"What was… that?"

"I don't know; Anna keeps making things when she has free time."

You threw it on the floor without even knowing what it was?

It seems like her Moonshine research has affected her humanity.

"Anyway, I'm confident it's complete, but clinical trials will take a while? You'll have to wait a bit more to use it after proper verification."

Christina picked up the triangular flask and looked at me.

"How about it? Do you want to try it? I'm sure it's safe, but I can't take responsibility if there's any issue."

A completed Moonshine. Christina is confident in its completion, but there might be side effects.

If I drink this, will I be the first user of Moonshine in this world?

"I won't die, right?"

"Still, you should decide calmly…"

I took the triangular flask. Harriet couldn't tell me not to drink it, but she was uneasy as I drank.

A pink fluorescent substance.

It looked like something you should never drink. In the original world, I would have been sure it was radioactive.

Trusting Christina's abilities, I gulped down the pink fluorescent substance.

"Wow… You really don't hold back, do you?"

Christina looked astonished, as if she hadn't expected me to really drink it.

"How is it?"

Christina asked me with curious, sparkling eyes.

Naturally, I didn't feel any sort of power-up.

But.

This is strange.

"Why… is it delicious?"

This is delicious?

"Right?! It's tasty!"

Christina is insane.

—---

Christina had added a new effect to Moonshine that wasn't in the original work: taste.

I'm not sure if overconsumption would cause problems, but it was delicious enough to make one suspect that someone might collapse from excessive Moonshine intake.

I didn't immediately feel the effects of Moonshine. It would have been scarier if the effects had appeared instantly.

Gradually, I would come to feel the effects of the Moonshine on my body.

The members of the Magic Research Club were all gathered in one place.

Myself, Harriet, Adelia, Christina, Anna, Louis, and Redina.

"It seems like we've all managed to achieve our goals one way or another. Good job, everyone."

Each of us had contributed to the research in our own way. In Louis Ancton's case, he participated in both the cartridge and Moonshine production process, and practically took on the role of treasurer, handling budget execution.

Somehow, we had completed tasks that we all thought were impossible.

We accomplished what no other magic research group could do, and it took us not decades, but less than half a year.

No one would believe it if they heard it.

"Did you send our research results to the Temple University?"

"Not yet, I thought it would be best to show you the finished product first, since you're the president."

Although I'm only the president in name, everyone acknowledges that I played an important role too.

I was the one who insisted on attempting the impossible, albeit with some coercion, and in doing so, we turned the impossible into possible.

"Now, let's get the bad news out of the way."

I organized my thoughts.

A decision that everyone might not accept.

But a decision that everyone must accept.

"Don't submit the report."

Upon hearing my calm words, everyone's expressions inevitably turned strange.

If only I had known about Cantus Magna and Akasha first.

I wouldn't have asked these kids to do anything.

Because the order was reversed, I had unwittingly put them all in danger.

"Let's keep the fact that we created this item a secret, and act as if our research failed publicly."

In the end, I had to admit it.

—---

"What are you talking about all of a sudden?"

Harriet spoke for everyone, her face pale with shock. We should have been showered with endless praise, yet here I was suggesting we keep our research results a secret.

We were young wizards who turned the impossible into possible.

What Cantus Magna wanted was magic.

Not a prohibition, but magic.

And magic could be newly created.

Cantus Magna would need wizards who could create countless spells more than he would need numerous spells.

Two miracles that could change the history of magic had occurred in a high school club, even if it was a Royal Class.

Word would spread far and wide, and these kids would inevitably become stars in the world of magic.

Cantus Magna would focus their attention here, rather than on the dungeons in Darkland.

If they were desperate enough to complete Akasha, they would want a source of countless spells.

The current Magic Research Club was an irresistible target for Cantus Magna.

Our research results must not be revealed.

If Cantus Magna were to abduct these kids.

I don't have the confidence to handle that situation.

That's why I had no choice but to say it.

Let's pretend we didn't discover anything.

"Let's pretend this never happened."

Everyone had accomplished a miracle, turning the impossible into possible, so naturally, they would want recognition from the world.

However, the one who first suggested it now wants to act as if it never happened.

No one could understand this.

What kind of absurdity is this madman trying to pull off now?

Not even a hint of such expression was seen.

Why, then?

Why does it have to be like this?

They felt sorrow, resentment, and even anger.

"Say something. Why are you doing this?"

Only Harriet.

Only Harriet asks me for a reason, as if trying to hear the story.

If the research results are revealed, the entire Magic Research Society would be in danger. Just as the Black Order has infiltrated the Temple, Cantus Magna might be infiltrating the Temple as well.

Fortunately, no one outside of the Magic Research Society members knows that these two items have been completed.

A reason.

I cannot tell her about Cantus Magna.

However, coming up with something has always been my specialty.

If there is no reason, create one.

"The Demon King."

A magical word that can justify everything.

Just as Bertus attached that magical word to the extermination of the republicans.

As the Demon King, I too can attach that magical word as much as I want.

"This, objectively speaking, could elevate humanity's power by several levels beyond what we have now, essentially making it an incredibly powerful strategic asset."

"And if the Demon King, who's dreaming of revenge against humans somewhere, learns that such an item was created here, in your hands, what do you think he will do?"

"Don't you think he'd try to eliminate you before you create something even more dangerous?"

At my words, everyone's faces begin to turn pale.

When I first said that I would create Moonshine and Power Cartridge, the threat of the Demon King was not imminent.

However, the recent chain of events has made the threat of the Demon King more tangible.

"Not too long ago, there was a tragic incident."

The death of Duke Grantz.

Everyone knew the story, making their expressions even graver. Harriet's face, in particular, looked significantly worse.

"The Demon King is closer than you think."

Yes, in reality, I am right beside you, but that won't be a problem.

Let's blame it on the Demon King.

CHAPTER 384

The threat of the Demon King could suddenly befall anyone. In fact, not long ago, Liana had lost her father to the Demon King's hands.

That event implanted a sense of crisis about the threat of the Demon King.

This is a great invention, but it poses an excessively significant threat to the Demon King.

So if it becomes known externally that such a remarkable invention has been created, the Demon King may target you all.

"The Demon King might target us, or perhaps even kidnap us to utilize us as they please."

Demon King.

Kidnap.

It reminds me of the Charlotte de Gardias incident.

"Do you understand what I'm saying?"

I speak calmly, without a hint of jest, and with utmost seriousness.

"You all might be in danger because you've created something so extraordinary."

Although I had framed it as the threat of the Demon King, it was genuinely a threat from Cantus Magna.

"I see…"

Everyone was rejoicing at having achieved their goal, but I had thrown cold water on their celebration.

However, their expressions seemed to show that they had sobered up from the

splash of cold water. These kids hadn't had the energy to worry about the consequences of the item they were only focused on creating and succeeding.

I, who knew nothing about magic, had contemplated and made a judgment about the current state of the continent.

Though it was a lie.

It was a decision made to protect the children.

"But if the Demon King attacks later, shouldn't the army and the mages become stronger with these two inventions…?"

Adelia timidly suggests as such.

There were others who agreed with her words.

These two powerful items would drastically enhance humanity's war capabilities. Instead of hiding in fear of the Demon King, it could be thought that humanity should become stronger through these inventions, and that this was the true righteous path.

A sense of justice for humanity could exist.

Since these items were for the peace of humanity, maybe we should accept the risks that come with it. That's another way to think about it.

"Alternatively, the Demon King's military might could also become stronger."

"…"

Rather, the Demon King could secretly exploit these items to enhance their military power and potentially kidnap you all.

At my words, Adelia hung her head with a crestfallen expression.

"Nothing is more precious than your lives."

I say, looking at everyone.

"Don't say that you can do anything if it's for defeating the Demon King. None of you

need to die for something."

In the end, I end up making a clichéd statement that life is the best, even if you have to roll in a dung heap.

But what use is there if you're not alive?

Death can only achieve death.

I cherish Harriet and all the members of the Magic Research Society present here. I may not have cherished them all equally or with the same heart, but they are the ones who have followed my unreasonable demands with excessive diligence.

I cannot let them be harmed.

However, this is a good time to be intoxicated with a half-baked sense of mission.

With the massive threat of the Demon King to humanity looming closer every moment, we have the items that might save everyone in our hands.

It might sound excessively selfish to suggest sealing these items away.

"But… Reinhardt. If we reveal this, I don't know if it will cause another war, but… People might get hurt a little less."

Louis Ancton cautiously speaks.

Hiding this could be seen as a selfish act. He might even feel guilty.

It's not like the Demon King would necessarily try to kill or kidnap us.

"And if we request protection from the Temple or the Royal Family… Won't they protect us?"

It might not be dangerous. So, he might think that hiding such a thing due to their own safety concerns is a bad thing to do.

Louis Ancton is talented in academics, but he's originally a selfish guy. He feels frustrated with his own talent for not being able to use magic, and he's participating in the Magic Research Society thinking he might be able to do something there.

And, he's achieved something significant in the history of humanity.

It's not that Louis is frustrated that he couldn't announce it.

In the series of ensuing events, it seems like he's thinking this might help humanity.

Not to flaunt his own achievements and results, but because this is necessary for people. Even if it might become more dangerous, he wonders if that's not something they can bear.

Louis Ancton, too, had changed at some point during the series of events.

An interesting guy.

But just because he thinks that doesn't mean I can affirm his thoughts.

The Demon King is born.

The threat you face is not from the Demon King.

The kids are carefully watching my reaction.

They don't know when I might suddenly snap and curse them out.

Should I just do that? Telling them to just do as they're told?

What would happen if I did that?

But, this time, I didn't want to do that.

It would make their efforts meaningless.

"Let's not do it."

I beg everyone.

"Please."

I don't know how desperate my words felt to them.

"…"

In the end, Louis didn't say they had to do it.

—---

It was an unfair thing to do, but everyone eventually agreed to hide the results of their efforts. Ostensibly, it was to prepare for the threat of the Demon King, but my real intention was to hide this achievement from Cantus Magna.

It's also deceiving the patrons who provided substantial funds, but what can you do? Even if the research had been successful, there was never any money to return to them. It was a sponsorship, after all.

Christina agreed to hide the results for now.

"But, if there are no side effects, shouldn't we be able to give something like Moonshine to our friends?"

Everyone nodded their heads at that opinion.

Hiding what kind of drug it was, roughly claiming it was a similar kind of tonic, wouldn't it be okay to share with the close-combat major students?

Of course, from my perspective, that's both convenient and inconvenient.

If the gates cannot be stopped, it would be better for the overall level of those who will face them to rise.

But is it right to give Moonshine to the children?

They may end up fighting not the monsters of the gate, but me.

"Yes, I can do that much."

However, I have no reason to stop it from going that far.

In the end, we decided to hide the power cartridges and share Moonshine only if I, the first user, observed no side effects.

Christina was confident there would be no side effects, and I agreed, but it was right to keep an eye on it first.

Two days later.

We moved from the first-year dormitory to the second-year dormitory.

—---

It wasn't much of a move. We simply gathered our belongings and went upstairs, and even then, the Temple's servants moved everything for us. I didn't have much to carry, but for magic-major students, there were so many belongings that the servants had to come and go several times.

"We've moved up a floor."

"Indeed."

Nevertheless, moving up one floor brought a strong sense of becoming second-years.

Since the dormitory structure was almost the same for each grade, only moving up one floor didn't make much of a difference. The room numbers remained the same.

I was still in room A-11, and Ellen was in room A-2.

A-2 in the second year, to be precise.

It must have originally been Adriana's room. It had been vacant for quite some time.

“Ah, this goes here. Please put it here. No, not there, here.”

I heard Harriet talking about arranging things in her room, which was wide open. She seemed to have the most belongings among our classmates.

Ellen and I approached the railing of the second-floor main lobby.

We rarely had a chance to look down at the main lobby from the first floor, but now we would have many opportunities to do so.

"Nothing seems to have changed, but somehow it feels different."

Both Ellen and I seemed to share the same feeling of unease. In the first-floor main lobby below, we could see Ceres van Owen, a fifth-year student.

Now a sixth-year, Ceres van Owen.

I heard she reluctantly continued to serve as the student council president due to a lack of volunteers. Since royal class students are a small minority, there are rarely more than one or two candidates for the position.

Still, the student council president used to change in the second year, but Ceres ended up serving consecutive terms due to various changes. The butterfly effect may have played a role, but I'm not sure of the specifics.

Ellen seemed to be reminiscing as she looked at the student council president standing in the lobby.

The president was the first person to welcome her when she entered the Temple.

That meant.

"The first-years must be arriving today."

"I guess so."

As the seniors vacated their rooms, the first-year students would move into the dormitory before the end of the winter break. Ceres was talking to the boys and girls with fresh faces in the lobby, who seemed to have just arrived.

It was unlikely that they would all arrive today.

As Ellen and I leaned against the railing and gazed at the scene below, a voice came from behind us.

"What's going on? Are those our juniors?"

It was Liana de Grantz.

"It seems so."

"Hmm."

Liana glanced down at the new students below the railing, then turned her head away, seemingly disinterested.

"Let's go."

"Alright."

Both Cliffman and Liana were dressed in gym clothes, apparently more concerned with their own tasks than paying attention to the newcomers.

Still, under normal circumstances, they would have shown some interest.

Liana, now oblivious to everything except her own duties, left the dormitory with Cliffman through the first-floor lobby.

"…"

Ellen silently watched Liana's retreating figure.

I tapped Ellen's shoulder.

"We should get going, too."

We had to attend our training with Saviolin Turner. The time she had scheduled for us was fast approaching, and it was about time for us to gather at the second-year B-class training ground.

We had never been late before, and we weren't curious about what would happen if we disobeyed the Grandmaster's training assembly instructions.

Just as I was about to leave with Ellen.

"Among the new students, there seems to be a half-moon child."

At Ellen's words, I naturally shifted my gaze to the first-floor lobby.

And I couldn't help but widen my eyes.

"The hair color is unusual."

Silver hair.

A small child.

A silver-haired small child.

Lucinil calmly walked toward the Royal Class dormitory.

No.

Why is the Vampire Lord here?

I had no idea what was happening.

The Lord of Wednesday.

Lord Vampire Lucinil had somehow become a first-year student in the Temple Royal Class.

—---

I couldn't even ask about the sudden appearance of Lucinil as my junior. I couldn't possibly approach a first-year student I had just met.

I had no choice but to be restless, not knowing how the situation was unfolding.

I never imagined that Lucinil would take such an unexpected action. How did she pass through the Temple Gate? How did she obtain admission? How was her identity arranged?

"I arranged it as a talented individual I discovered."

Surprisingly, the answer came not from Lucinil but from Teacher Epinhauser, who sought me out.

"I regret not being able to inform you earlier, but it was a matter that was hastily agreed upon."

No.

It was absurd enough that Lucinil had become my junior, but why did I have to listen to an explanation from Teacher Epinhauser?

And from what he said, it seemed like he had admitted Lucinil to the Royal Class for the reason of being a talented individual he discovered. Was she acting as some sort of guardian?

"While discussing matters related to the dungeon, it was suggested that we should strengthen the protection around you."

"From our side?"

"Both parties agreed."

The Black Order and the Vampire Council must have had a discussion due to the issue with the dungeon's structure.

And so, both the Vampire Council and the Black Order decided to strengthen the protection of my person.

"We can do that."

Apparently, the Black Order decided to take action as well, as I could be in danger.

Somehow, it's touching, isn't it? But then again, I'm not sure if it's really a touching moment.

"Of course, there's the issue with Cantus Magna, but even without that, there are many situations where you could be in danger. Everyone agreed that we need to have someone nearby who can quickly extract you in times of crisis. And when it comes to a Lord Vampire, there's hardly any power to compare. Well, as long as it doesn't cause any inconvenience in daily life, there should be no problem disguising it as temple life."

To the Black Order, I am an important piece on the board, but my potential for growth is high, not that I am currently extremely skilled.

Cantus Magna is a problem, and if my identity is exposed, the temple itself will become an enemy. So the Black Order decided that someone who knows my truth should stay at the temple.

"How exactly did you enroll her?"

"Passing through the temple's search gate is not that difficult."

Epinhauser vouched for her identity and status, and barriers were no problem for Lucinil.

I knew that the temple's barrier and search system were not absolute, but it's surprising that a magician like Lucinil could easily come and go.

Of course, it's not that the temple's defenses are weak.

Lord Vampire is an overly powerful magician.

In the case of Eleris, there was no need to call her to the temple, and she has now left the empire.

With Eleris gone, Lucinil decided to come to the temple to help me, as the possibility of me being in danger increased.

Good.

Both the Black Order and the Council, and Lucinil, must have made such decisions because they think I shouldn't die.

Epinhauser also took a significant risk.

If Lucinil's true identity is revealed, Epinhauser would be implicated as well.

It's as if the patriotic Epinhauser brought the impure element of a Lord Vampire directly into the temple.

It means that my existence is considered so important within the Order now that Epinhauser would compromise his own values.

It's shocking that Epinhauser not only knew about Lucinil's enrollment but actually led it himself.

"Originally, it would be more convenient to send a magician from the Order, but since you can't trust them properly if they're one of us, reluctantly someone from your

side had to enroll. Keep that in mind."

He allowed Lucinil to come because he wouldn't trust anyone from his own side.

The Black Order…

In fact, aren't they really good guys?

However, Aaron Mede's misdeeds lingered in my mind. Of course, those actions had nothing to do with the Order's instructions, but were merely personal transgressions.

—---

Lucinil's enrollment.

The reason was for my own safety. Still, it's a bit strange that they didn't ask me anything, considering I'm the boss.

Well.

I suppose it's fortunate they're treating me like the boss. After all, they're trying to protect me.

Of course, I heard the explanation from Professor Epinhauser after the fact, but I couldn't speak with Lucinil.

On the night when all the freshmen entered the dormitory, Ceres gathered them to announce notices and precautions.

Just as we had done in our first year, seniors crowded the railings to watch the first-years, and the second-years were no different.

There were some new faces among the main characters of the original work, but I wasn't interested in that.

There was one freshman who couldn't help but stand out.

A tiny silver-haired kid.

"Now, A-11, would you like to introduce yourself?"

"Lucinil!"

Seeing the old woman, who might have been hundreds or even a thousand years old, act like the youngest in the room and cheerfully shout her name.

“What's with her! She's so cute!”

“Let's go see her later!”

“Yeah, yeah!”

And it seemed like she was fully aware that people would find her cute, as she puffed out her chest with pride.

What should I say?

That.

It's infuriating, right?

—---

What on earth happened with the talent detector? What talent did she get admitted for?

Anyway, I have to talk to Lucinil.

If she came to the temple for my protection, then it's only natural to build a rapport with Lucinil and create a situation where it's not strange for us to be together.

I wasn't planning on paying attention to juniors, but a junior I couldn't help but notice has enrolled. She's not even a junior to begin with.

So.

"That… assembly… right?"

"Yes."

After the announcement was over, I stopped a first-year A-class junior who was about to leave and said that.

"Get all the first-years together at the training ground."

So.

I don't intend to scold him!

This is the only excuse I have to meet Lucinil!

The A-class dormitory training ground on the first floor, where I had returned immediately after moving.

I looked at the eleven first-year freshmen gathered in the training ground.

Even though I didn't order them to do so, they lined up neatly from number one onwards. Lucinil, number eleven, stood at the far left, staring intently at me.

With a look of great interest.

Lucinil seems to be a sort of additional enrollee, and considering that the original A-class freshmen, which had been ten, had now become eleven.

Inadvertently, because of me, there ended up being one more student than in the original work.

I didn't intend to scold them. I just wanted them to introduce themselves and move on.

"First of all, my name is Reinhardt, and I'm A-class number eleven in the second year…"

"Number eleven?"

As I was about to start my introduction, a guy standing at the far right cut me off.

"Are you the one who assembled us, number eleven?"

"…Huh?"

What did I just hear?

As I was doubting my ears, the guy standing at the far right tilted his head and began glaring at me.

That's right.

As it was in the original work, the A-class freshmen were made up of the most ill-mannered bunch. They didn't even treat B-class second year as seniors, which led to episodes of trouble between Ludwig and them.

Among them, first-year A-1.

His name is Roberto de Gardenia.

Heir to the Gardenia Kingdom and one of the top contenders for the most ill-mannered.

His talents were in the divine power series, related to magic power, and perhaps weapon skills.

As number one, it's natural for him to have a talent vending machine level.

"No matter if you're A-class. You're still just a stepping stone."

Roberto glared at me, maintaining his crooked posture, even crossing his arms.

No, how can anyone be so incredibly rude without any logical explanation?

It's my fault since I created him, but still.

Well.

"Even if you're my senior, please show some decency."

"Uh… Yeah."

I didn't assemble them to scold them.

"Do you, by any chance, want to get beaten until you pass out?"

He's really getting on my nerves.

CHAPTER 385

The Newcomer, A-1 Roberto de Gardenia

Roberto de Gardenia, the newcomer of A-1 class, never expected to be insulted even by his seniors from the same A-class.

"Are you looking to get beaten to death?"

Startled by my sudden outburst, Roberto seemed flustered.

Naturally, the already tense atmosphere turned ice-cold.

“…Excuse me?"

"Are you looking to get beaten to death by running your mouth so carelessly, you little brat?"

This guy was royalty and an heir to the throne.

He probably never heard such words in his life, and that's why he was clearly flustered.

"Are you insulting me, the legitimate heir to the Gardenia Royal Family?"

"…”

I lost my cool at his words and slapped my face a few times to regain my composure.

Feeling a bit more composed, I approached Roberto, who was glaring at me with hostile eyes.

"Hey."

And then…

-Smack!

"Ugh!"

I slapped him hard.

"W-What are you doing…!"

He cried out in shock, grabbing his leg as he collapsed to the ground.

"I publicly humiliated the heir of the Gardenia Royal Family, or whatever, and smacked his leg."

-Smack!

"Ugh!"

"Now, what are you going to do about it, you little bastard?"

-Smack!

"Ugh!"

As he lay on the ground, I kicked his side, sending him rolling across the floor of the training ground.

"Did you forget what they told you at the temple, not to flaunt your status?"

Status means nothing in the temple.

Everyone was witnessing this firsthand.

He probably didn't expect to be mercilessly beaten by a senior who claimed to be a commoner, despite being royalty himself. Lying on the ground, he looked utterly shocked.

"Get up, kid."

"You'll regret what you just did to me…”

"Shut up."

"Gasp!"

As I got into a kicking stance, he gasped and curled up in fear.

This guy was scared.

He couldn't believe that he was actually frightened, his face draining of color in real-time.

"Do you really want to die?"

"…"

"Do you want to die? Hey, answer me."

"I, I…"

"Answer with 'yes' or 'no' only."

"N-No…"

Hearing his small, trembling voice, I slowly backed away.

"Some kids only understand when they get hit. Get up."

"Ugh…"

"Are you not getting up quickly?"

The other students, both male and female, had frozen expressions as they watched a senior put a classmate in his place in real-time.

Lucinil's eyes were particularly wide.

I stared at Roberto as he stood up, his teeth clenched and glaring at me.

No, this kid…

He still hasn't learned his manners.

"Hit me if you have the guts."

"…"

"But, you won't be able to handle the consequences after that."

"…"

"Are you going to do it or not? Hurry up and tell me."

He seemed to be seriously considering it.

Is this kid really going to hit me?

“That senior… isn't he the one?”

However, I could hear whispers around us.

“Last festival, the one who won the first-year tournament… that senior.”

“Yeah, I think I've seen him before.”

Come to think of it.

If I had not entered the temple this year but had been at the temple since before, there would have been plenty of people who had seen my face.

Roberto didn't know me, but there were those who recognized me.

The first-year tournament winner.

At those words, Roberto's face turned pale.

"No, that's… that's not…”

It seemed that the title of first-year tournament winner was enough to have an arrogant person learn a lesson in manners.

Seeing him roll his eyes in the end, I glanced around at the first-year students.

Oh, I really ruined the atmosphere.

No.

That's not why I gathered the kids in the first place.

But it ended up looking like I gathered them to do this?

They all seemed to shiver, trying not to even make eye contact with me.

Last year, when we were freshmen, Redina tried to slap us to teach us that things like social status didn't matter.

But I ended up doing exactly the same thing. Even worse, Redina failed, but I unintentionally succeeded too well.

A fun temple life? No way!

How did it end up like this?

"No, from the beginning, I didn't gather you guys to say such things…"

Startled!

"Juniors! Are you here?!"

And then.

Bursting open the door to the training hall, with a face full of anticipation.

That.

Harriet de Saint-Owan appeared.

"Uh… you…?"

For a moment, Harriet had a "why are you here?" expression as she saw me already in the training hall.

Her gaze shifted to the juniors lined up in front of me.

The juniors standing in a straight line.

At the far right end.

Roberto, with his clothes in disarray (from being hit).

All of them lowering their heads in a solemn atmosphere.

Harriet began to gape in disbelief.

She must have seen a sight too unbelievable to trust.

"No. Hey. This is…"

"Th-this really is… This trash!"

Smack!

"No, it's not! I'm telling you it's not! Well, it ended up being right, but that's not the point!"

"This! If it were someone else, maybe! Huh?! But you! You did this!"

Thwack! Thwack, thwack!

"W-wait! For real! Please, just listen to me!"

Of course.

No excuses were accepted.

—---

The first-year students who had witnessed a senior suddenly getting scolded by a female senior couldn't understand what was happening and had bewildered expressions on their faces.

It seemed that Harriet hadn't come to gather the juniors but to befriend them. So, she looked around here and there and ended up seeing this scene.

In the end, after getting scolded by Harriet and failing to achieve even a conversation with Lucinil, I was dragged away.

After being forcibly returned to the second-year dormitory, Harriet sat me down in the lobby and spoke with a serious expression.

"I'm genuinely disappointed in you."

"No… it wasn't like that."

"If it wasn't that, then what was it?"

As I attempted to explain the whole story, the situation grew increasingly bizarre.

"What's going on?"

Ellen, with a towel draped over her neck, approached as she noticed Harriet looking furious.

"Did you really gather those freshmen just to intimidate them?"

"Intimidate…? Like what happened to us in our first year…?"

"Exactly! And you hit someone too! The one on the far right, right?"

"Well, yeah, but… I did hit him! But there's more to it!"

It was true that I had hit someone.

Upon hearing this, Ellen stared at me intently.

Contempt.

Her gaze was filled with disdain.

Even Ellen couldn't remain indifferent to the atrocious act I had committed.

Especially because I, of all people, should not have done it.

"Listen, let me explain!"

It was unfair, but…

Although I felt pathetic for being upset about something I had actually done, it was still unfair!

I sat Ellen and Harriet down and properly explained the situation.

—---

I had only intended to make a simple announcement, but the first freshman had provoked me. That's how it happened.

Regardless, the truth was that I had hit someone.

Upon hearing the freshmen's obnoxious comments that began with "How dare you to summon us number 11?", Harriet's mouth hung open in shock.

“…He’s lucky you didn't kill him."

Harriet responded as if it were odd that I hadn't at least half-killed him, given my temperament.

"You showed restraint. You're kind."

Ellen, on the other hand, praised me for my actions.

What was this?

I did hit him.

That part was true.

But, knowing how much worse I could have been, both of them ended up praising me instead.

Does being a lesser scumbag excuse one's actions?

It feels good, but it's also strange!

Anyway, it's nice that they're praising me, but I really shouldn't accept such

compliments!

"I guess we should warn the freshmen to be particularly cautious around you."

"Seems like… we should."

In the end, they gathered the freshmen to alert them that, while they should be wary of all upperclassmen, they should be especially careful around me, the explosive Reinhardt.

Even Ellen agreed.

I really didn't mean to hit anyone, honestly…

Ultimately, my attempt to confront Lucinil ended in bizarre failure.

—---

If this were the original story, the second-year A-Class students would be taming the freshmen just as they had been tamed themselves.

But now, the current second-year A-Class students had become gentle souls uninterested in such activities, and Reinhardt went to Lucinil and did something similar.

In the end, Harriet and Ellen summoned the first-year freshmen once again, this time to convey a different sort of warning.

Instead of the unpleasant-looking male upperclassman who had first gathered them, the calm and composed female upperclassman, Harriet, and Ellen, who had violently beaten the ill-tempered male upperclassman, appeared before the freshmen.

Although their expressions didn't seem threatening, the sight they had just witnessed had everyone on edge nonetheless.

"I'm not here to scold you. I just wanted to gather you all to share some information, given what happened earlier. My name is Harriet de Saint-Owan, a second-year student in class A-4."

Harriet de Saint-Owan.

"Second-year, class A-2, Ellen."

Then Ellen briefly introduced herself as well.

The two seniors who had come to see them now were distinctly different in demeanor from the previous encounter.

There was no sign of them wanting to scold anyone.

And just like that…

As someone had recognized Reinhardt earlier, there were also juniors who recognized Ellen.

"Um… Are you the one who won the Miss Temple contest?"

Miss Temple.

At that mention, even the juniors who were seeing Ellen for the first time widened their eyes.

"Yes."

Ellen slightly nodded her head in response to the question, as if winning the Miss Temple contest was neither a matter of pride nor shame.

And the female junior who recognized Ellen, of course, recognized Harriet as well.

"You… you're the one I saw at the Unrestricted Tournament! You beat the fifth-year senior!"

"Ah, well? I didn't win… I lost…"

"But you didn't lose! You forfeited!"

Reinhardt, the first-year champion, was impressive, but even more so was Harriet, who had taken a set from fifth-year Olivia Lanze in the Unrestricted Tournament.

It had been a fierce match, with the arena nearly being destroyed.

Not used to such situations, Harriet's face reddened and she stammered when the junior recognized her.

The first-year students stared blankly at the two of them.

The first senior to arrive was the champion of the first-year tournament, which determined the strongest among the Temple first-year students.

The senior with a calm demeanor was the winner of Miss Temple.

The senior with braided hair was the one who had beaten a fifth-year student.

Even in the Royal Class, the 2nd year Class A people thought that something is out of the ordinary. Lucinil watched the two of them with interest.

"Ahem! Anyway, I didn't gather you here to scold you but to share some information."

Harriet tried to regain her composure with a few coughs, then began talking to the juniors.

"The guy who came looking for you earlier was Reinhardt. He's a loose cannon, so don't provoke him. Especially you."

Harriet pointed precisely at Roberto, who was at the far right.

"Me? Uh… Yes."

"You got off easy with Reinhardt."

Roberto had already realized that he had been greatly mistaken, seeing Reinhardt's behavior.

This was the kind of place they were in.

A place where commoners could defeat royalty if they flaunted their status carelessly.

A place with no room for complaints.

And the seniors even said that he got off easy after being hit.

Strictly speaking, the Temple wasn't exactly that kind of place.

But how would the freshmen know that Reinhardt was an exceptional case?

Thus, they ended up believing that the Temple, or even the Royal Class, was originally that kind of place.

"Be careful from now on. You think I'll remember your face?"

You've caught Reinhardt's eye.

Harriet said this without even realizing she was saying it.

Usually, the ones who have no awareness of it are the ones who say it the most harshly.

"Be careful."

In addition, Ellen, who had been quietly watching Roberto, also spoke briefly.

"You'll get hurt like that."

Upon hearing Miss Temple's calm advice, Roberto's complexion paled even more.

Speaking carelessly could cause someone to not even be able to pick up their bones, so Ellen's words were purely out of concern.

However, the problem was that they didn't sound like that to the listener.

In the end,

Even though they claimed they hadn't come to scare them, both Harriet and Ellen ended up scaring the children just as much as Reinhardt had.

Nevertheless, the atmosphere lightened up a bit after that.

As they began to share stories and discuss their majors, Harriet showed a slightly clumsy side of herself, making the others realize that she wasn't as scary a senior as they had thought.

"You're in your first year?"

"Yes, I'm thirteen. My major is magic."

The silver-haired girl, Lucinil, said with a beaming smile, causing Harriet's heart to tighten and her expression to falter.

Unconsciously, she stopped herself from patting Lucinil's head.

Her major was magic.

"What's your talent?"

"Destruction magic."

Destruction magic talent.

Though it didn't suit her cute appearance, talent didn't have to match one's appearance.

Harriet smiled brightly at Lucinil's response.

"Magic? Are you interested in the Magic Research Club?"

"Magic Research Club?"

"Yeah! It's an in-house club of the Royal Class… Actually, that punk from earlier is the president, but he's not really a bad kid… Once you get to know him, he's actually a really good person."

Upon hearing that, the corner of Lucinil's mouth turned up in a subtle smile.

"Ah, I see…"

Without knowing it, Harriet had ended up helping Reinhardt.

CHAPTER 386

The second year had begun.

Things didn't go as planned. I couldn't gather the kids again, and I had no choice but to believe that everything would work out as I registered for classes with Ellen.

There were a few significant changes in the second year.

First, the swordsmanship major classes that could be taken with the general students were all replaced.

They were reorganized into classes exclusively for Royal Class students, and the class hours were significantly extended. The Royal and General Classes were separated.

The reason was simple.

"The Temple will ensure safety, but we must be prepared for any emergencies. If the Temple is attacked, the Royal Class is likely to be the first target."

"From this year onwards, you will receive more practical combat training."

The classes had transformed into combat training.

Instead of teaching techniques, we began learning how to kill monsters, deal with magic, urban warfare, and how to behave in field situations.

If this was the case for close combat majors, magic majors would likely begin taking more practical classes, rather than just learning from magic books or lectures.

It goes without saying that the intensity of the classes had increased significantly.

And then…

"……”

"My name is Lucinil. Nice to meet you."

I couldn't help but be shocked to see Lucinil, whom Harriet had brought to the magic research club.

No.

How did it come to this?

Everyone stared at Lucinil, who appeared like a cute doll with silver hair and blue eyes.

Their expressions seemed to question whether the person before them was real.

"My talent is destruction magic. Senior Saint Owan asked if I was interested in magic research, so I came to see."

When she introduced herself as thirteen years old, my head nearly exploded.

No.

Grandma…

Aren't you feeling any sense of guilt?

Of course, it's not like I'm the one to talk!

"Mr. President, we met once before, didn't we?"

“…Yes, that's right."

Lucinil smiled sweetly as she said that.

Something feels off.

It really does!

"Hey, why do you look like that when you see such a cute kid?"

Harriet noticed my expression and embraced Lucinil's shoulder as she said that.

"No… It's just that I don't feel well…”

Lucinil's face, seemingly delighted by the attention from her senior, was really…

Something. It was definitely something.

—---

"What do you mean?"

"Protection."

At my words, Lucinil shrugged her shoulders and simply replied.

I had just brought Lucinil to my room, claiming there was something to discuss about joining the club.

It had been a while since she entered the Temple, but this was the first time we faced each other like this.

Lucinil claimed to have spread noise-cancellation throughout the room, telling me to speak comfortably.

So, I spoke comfortably.

"But it seems like you're enjoying this too much?"

"Goodness, is that something you should say?"

Well.

That…

Was it wrong for me to enjoy this the most?

"Considering the rumors about you and the tournament, you're really… something else."

With an air of admiration, Lucinil crossed her arms and glanced at me.

"You look like you have good fortune, don't you?"

"…"

That's right!

That's not what I should be saying!

Ah!

I'm sorry!

I'm kind of successful! I know it's not supposed to be like this!

But this is no joke!

"By the way, is this really alright? You know… living a normal life…"

"I can handle sunlight, and as for food, it doesn't matter if I vomit or spit it out later. Pretending to be human isn't a new thing for me. I've grown quite accustomed to it."

Lucinil shrugged her shoulders as if living a normal human life wasn't difficult at all.

"Still, you should know that this wasn't an easy decision for me."

Lucinil looked at me with a serious expression.

"Your safety is always at risk to the extent that I have to infiltrate here myself."

It was true that Lucinil had taken great risks by entering the temple. She had come to the temple to protect me.

"So, I'd rather not just watch children play here, but there's no other choice, so accept it."

"I understand, but… I can't help but feel that you're somehow indulging your whims. Am I mistaken?"

"Hmm…"

At my words, Lucinil narrowed her eyes and then smiled slyly.

"I can't deny it. I like it when people find me cute, especially when those people are even cuter than me."

Really.

All the Lord Vampires are insane.

I thought Lucinil was an exception, but she's definitely the most insane one of all.

She's even weirder than Antirianus!

"Let's get along well from now on. So that you won't feel uncomfortable with me by your side."

Thinking about it coldly, Lucinil's words made perfect sense.

It's not my random thought, but since we became friends through the Magic Research Club, a junior member should suffice as a connection.

But…

It's psychologically distressing.

—---

Lucinil joined the Magic Research Club.

There were more first-year A-class magic majors, but knowing that I was the president of the Magic Research Club, they seemed to have avoided joining.

So, Lucinil was the only magic major who joined the club.

The first semester of the second year had begun, and I had juniors. Of course, I didn't have much in common with them. I could see Ludwig and the B-class guys hanging out with the juniors quite often.

Thus, it should be natural for me to be friends with Lucinil through the connection of the Magic Research Club junior, and there's nothing strange about me hanging out with her. I had that thought too.

However.

"Senior?"

"Senior!"

"Senior!"

"Brother!"

I'm losing my mind!

I feel like I'm going to explode!

"Stop looking for me!"

I couldn't help but be taken aback by Lucinil, who followed me around almost to the point of stalking.

Whether Lucinil was dutifully fulfilling her assigned task or doing it to torment me, she annoyingly roamed around the second-year dormitories in search of me, trying to cling to my side.

This wasn't protection, it was harassment.

She seemed to enjoy seeing me frustrated. I was certain of it.

My classmates also found it somewhat odd that Lucinil was so fond of me.

The tipping point was Bertus.

"…"

"Hello, senior."

Lucinil bowed her head slightly to Bertus, whom she met while roaming the hallways.

"Oh, the first-year who joined halfway through…"

"Lucinil."

"…"

Bertus stared intently at Lucinil, who had bowed to him.

A silver-haired girl with blue eyes.

A junior.

And Bertus, who didn't know much about the fact that she was actually following me around.

Moreover.

I had disguised myself as a silver-haired girl before.

"…By any chance."

Silver hair and that, um.

Do you have that sort of thing?

Bertus tried to say something, but in the end, he passed by without saying a word.

No!

He clearly thought I was some sort of pervert!

Did he just conclude that I have a fetish for silver-haired people?

"Um?"

As Bertus hurriedly walked away, Lucinil tilted her head in confusion.

"Reinhardt! What are you doing?"

Then Olivia Lanze, who hadn't visited the second-year dormitory in a while, noticed the silver-haired girl clinging to my side and tilted her head.

“……Who is this kid?"

"Is she yours?!"

Olivia added more fuel to the fire.

—---

After the new students arrived, an unusual spectacle arose among the second-year students.

Brother! Play with me!

Can't you just leave me alone? Huh? Stop following me already!

Whyyyyyy! Play with me, play with me, play with me! Buy me delicious food, give me piggyback rides, and take me for walks!

Aaaaargh!

A junior who persistently followed Reinhardt had appeared.

A hopeless pair of siblings.

Heinrich, Erich, Cayer, and Kono Lint.

The four of them sat in the lobby, watching the silver-haired girl tail Reinhardt and Reinhardt, in turn, trying to escape with a disgusted expression.

"What on earth… is she doing……?"

Kono Lint muttered, his mouth hanging open blankly.

"He's good-looking, isn't he?"

Erich mumbled in a resigned tone.

A pretty and cute girl, like a doll, began following him from the start of the new semester. At first, she called him "senior" and trailed after him, but now she calls him "brother."

"No matter how handsome he is, is it really to that extent? Huh?"

At Cayer's words, Heinrich shook his head with a dumbfounded expression.

"I don't know if it's to that extent… No, we're men, so we might not know."

Could it be that Reinhardt had something that appealed only to women, causing her to act like that? If that wasn't the case, none of them could understand how a first-year junior, who didn't even know him well, could become so entranced and end up like this.

"And it's so despicable how he's annoyed by a girl like her following him around."

Everyone nodded at Kono Lint's words.

They found it distasteful even though their mouths were agape in astonishment.

She persistently followed Reinhardt, ignoring the other seniors. However, Reinhardt avoided her, as if it were the most annoying thing in the world.

The luxury of the privileged, perhaps?

"Have you seen Reinhardt?"

As if to prove that thought, Ellen, last year's Miss Temple winner, approached them, looking for Reinhardt.

"He… avoided a first-year girl and went somewhere."

"Again?"

Ellen tilted her head and walked away, apparently searching for Reinhardt.

Reinhardt here, Reinhardt there.

In the past, people searched for Reinhardt, and now even his juniors joined the hunt. Meanwhile, those who were originally looking for him continued their search.

The luxury of the privileged.

"The world… is so unfair…”

"I know, right?"

Erich agreed, sighing deeply at Kono Lint's words.

“Why would you run to the magic research room without knowing any magic, big brother?”

“Just leave me alone!”

“No, I mean, Ellen is looking for you.”

“Huh? Oh… right?”

In the end.

Reinhardt was handsome.

That's why, when a new student suddenly started following Reinhardt, everyone thought it was something that could happen.

—---

Lucinil's tone changed when it was just the two of them.

Of course, he still had enough confidence to go mad if she kept whining in that childish tone even when they were alone.

Seeing her babble in front of Harriet, Ellen, and Adelia made her seem so childish that it gave him goosebumps.

Although Lucinil was half-protecting and half-teasing him, she couldn't keep doing it forever.

-Kaang!

"Ugh!"

Finally, watching me drop Tiamata from my hand, Saviolin Turner deactivated his

Aura Blade.

"Let's stop here for today."

Turner was still watching over Ellen's and my swordsmanship.

"Both of you are getting better at Magic Body Strengthening sensitivity. Keep up the good work."

"Yes, sir."

After Turner left, Ellen and I sat on a bench in the training arena, catching our breaths for a moment.

The effects of Moonshine were definitely felt. As my body's constitution changed due to Moonshine, I felt more and more familiar with Magic Body Strengthening, even physically.

I hadn't yet reached the level of using released mana for offense, but it seemed possible within this semester.

"How much longer until we become Swordmasters?"

Ellen suddenly asked.

Ellen was already in a state similar to a Swordmaster when using Lapelt. However, if she reached the level of a master herself, it was obvious she would become much stronger than she is now.

"I don't know."

It wouldn't be a distant future for Ellen.

But what about me? I don't think it's too far off either. However, I had a subtle certainty that becoming a Swordmaster meant facing many hardships ahead.

Fortunately, Lucinil did not get into disputes with others. Harriet seemed to find her endearing, and while Ellen didn't converse much with her, she would quietly watch her and occasionally pat her cheek and stroke her hair.

Even though she didn't express it well, one could feel that she found her adorable.

As for Olivia, Lucinil cautiously avoided her. It wasn't because she thought something would be exposed, but it seemed that Lucinil sensed an overwhelming divine power from Olivia.

Passing by, she once said, "I can't deal with her; she's too overwhelming." It seemed that even a lord vampire would find her divine power repulsive.

Of course, the recently irritable Olivia didn't find Lucinil cute or pretty.

It was just that whenever Lucinil encountered her, she would carefully avoid her, making her wonder why she was acting like that. But she didn't find it bothersome, so she left her alone.

Even when Olivia appeared, she would stop clinging to me and carefully avoid her, so Olivia didn't seem to feel any particular vigilance.

One way or another, the first semester of the second year began without any major incidents, and aside from Lucinil's appearance, my daily life wasn't much different than before.

However.

Now, a big event was approaching.

One day, in the second-year classroom of the common class, Professor Epinhauser spoke to us.

"As you know, the first anniversary event commemorating the end of the Great Demon War was planned for this weekend."

The first anniversary of the Great Demon War.

The event was soon to be held.

"However, it was decided that holding a large-scale festival under the current situation would be too difficult, so it has been canceled."

The altered development.

Now that the demon king's plot had been confirmed, the first-anniversary event evoked the certainty that the war hadn't truly ended. And thus, the commemorative event was no longer held.

But this event was very important.

"Instead, the Empire has decided to find a new owner for Alsebringer."

At Professor Epinhauser's words, silence filled the classroom.

Everyone must have heard such a story for the first time.

"So, all Royal Class members must gather at the Grand Hall of the Temple Headquarters by noon this weekend."

The first-anniversary commemorative event.

There, the sword of the hero Artorius, Alsebringer, chose Ludwig as its new owner. It was not originally the intention of the Imperial Royal Family. It was merely a memento and a symbol of humanity's victory in commemorating the end of the war, but the moment Alsebringer was revealed to the public, it went to Ludwig of its own accord.

But that event had disappeared.

A new demon king was plotting.

So the Empire, contrary to the original work, was trying to find a new owner for Alsebringer.

The more sacred relics there are, the better.

If Alsebringer chooses its owner, then a total of four sacred relics would have appeared in the world.

Lament, Tiamata, Alsebringer, and Lapelt.

It would be the first time in history that four sacred relics appeared simultaneously in one era.

Ellen stared at the blackboard with a determined expression.

It would be the moment when her brother's keepsake reappears in the world and chooses its owner.

CHAPTER 387

From the moment one is born, everything is determined. There are people with limitations on what they can achieve in life, while there are others who seemingly have no limits at all.

If one isn't born into a high social class, they must at least be born with talent.

In this way, one's innate qualities become their entire being.

Roberto de Gardenia firmly believed this.

As the first in line to inherit the throne of the Kingdom of Gardenia and praised as the most talented in the royal family's history, it was only natural for Roberto to live with such a mindset.

While not as powerful as Kernstadt, which was hailed as the most powerful kingdom, Gardenia was also one of the formidable nations. Therefore, Roberto, who was destined to be the next king, belonged to an extremely high social class.

When he enrolled in the Royal Class at the Temple, a prestigious institution where only the most talented individuals, regardless of social status, could attend, he was given the A-1 ranking among his peers. Roberto never doubted that he was one of the best talents in the world and a worthy successor to the throne.

"Would you like to taste defeat?"

That was his mindset, at least until he was suddenly provoked by a second-year senior.

Roberto thought he had responded quite gentlemanly. After all, the Royal Class determined one's rank based on talent, not status, and he was at the very top. Even if they were both A-Class, they couldn't possibly be equals.

He believed he had been quite polite, addressing his senior with at least some level of respect, despite the senior being ranked only 11th.

However, the response he received was violence.

Roberto never considered that he had been rude. As a boy who had spent his life in the palace, looking down on everyone except the king, addressing someone with respect in itself was a big deal, especially when that person was a commoner.

He had been struck by a mere 11th-ranked commoner, solely because that person was his senior by a year.

At the time, Roberto had refused his senior's challenge, but he now regretted it.

He could have shown that arrogant commoner the swordsmanship of the Gardenia Kingdom.

Winning the first-year tournament? Roberto couldn't understand the significance of such a trivial victory, especially since he hadn't seen it firsthand.

So, if that insolent commoner dared to provoke him again, he would gladly crush him, senior or not. He would show the true face of Gardenia's swordsmanship, restoring his damaged pride and honor.

"What are you glaring at?"

"Ah, nothing."

"Watch your eyes, or they'll make noise, kid."

-Thump thump

Roberto was left speechless as Reinhardt, whom he happened to encounter, gently tapped his cheek and walked away.

As it turns out, people are unable to easily overcome deep-rooted fears, regardless of their mindset.

Roberto squinted his eyes and glared at the retreating figure of Reinhardt, who had nonchalantly, even rudely, flicked his cheek as if to say he was nothing.

"!"

When Reinhardt suddenly turned around, Roberto quickly averted his eyes with lightning speed.

"If you're going to stare, then stare."

Reinhardt laughed, as if he had eyes on the back of his head, and uttered those words.

"Just one look, you brat."

This time, Roberto couldn't even properly look at Reinhardt's back as he turned away.

—---

To Roberto de Gardenia, his second-year senior Reinhardt had been nothing but an impudent commoner who had rudely summoned him from day one.

However, it seemed that his classmates thought differently.

"You remember that senior, right?"

"Oh, you mean… Reinhardt, the senior?"

"Yeah, him."

His impression was so striking that, although the seniors they had actually met were Ellen, Harriet, and Reinhardt, everyone's memory was filled with a strong impression of Reinhardt upon their first encounter.

First-year A-7, Scylla von Glaione.

A young noble from the Glaione barony, she had studied with them for a very long time, from the Temple elementary division. She was also a classmate who recognized Reinhardt, Harriet, and Ellen.

Her talents were in spear mastery and Magic Body Strengthening sensitivity. She possessed extraordinary talents and qualities among the battle-oriented students.

Scylla was sitting in the first-year lobby, conversing with her classmates. Roberto

pretended not to listen and secretly eavesdropped on the girls' conversation.

He didn't think he was eavesdropping. He merely thought that their conversation naturally flowed into his ears.

"Honestly, isn't he handsome?"

At Scylla's words, Roberto had to suppress the urge to jump up from his seat.

How could that good-for-nothing, who looked like a parasite, be considered handsome?

Roberto, who had unintentionally praised Reinhardt in his heart, held back his boiling anger.

"Really…? I was too scared at the time…"

"He did look scary…"

The ones who responded were A-3 Rosalie and A-10 Kardina Eyn. Both had seen Reinhardt trample Roberto mercilessly on their first encounter and remembered him as very intimidating.

"No, I heard he's not usually that angry. It's just his expression, or something…"

As Scylla's first impression of him during the tournament took precedence, it was clear that she placed more importance on the fact that Reinhardt was her senior.

Moreover, his major was close combat.

"He's incredibly skilled too! He was already able to perform Magic Body Strengthening in his first year, which even third-year students can't do. I saw it with my own eyes."

"Really…?"

Magic Body Strengthening.

Upon hearing those words, Roberto felt as if his thoughts had come to a halt.

It was a high-level combat skill that countless talented individuals, handpicked and trained for over a decade, barely managed to grasp. And he had already been able to do it during his first year.

Roberto wanted to scream for her to stop lying.

"I want to be friends with him…"

Upon hearing Scylla's words that were mixed with the wind, Roberto felt his already tangled feelings becoming even more twisted.

"Seems like Lucinil has already become close?"

The unique silver-haired girl, who was the 11th of the first year and had been half-asleep in the second-year dormitory, was practically living there.

"So... How on earth did he do it? I'll have to ask later."

Reinhardt.

Just hearing that name made Roberto's insides churn.

He desperately wanted to get back at him somehow.

Magic Body Strengthening? He must have resorted to some dirty trick. There's no way that a commoner, even if they were part of the temple, could have awakened to Magic Body Strengthening faster than him, who had received full support from the royal family, consumed all the best things for his body, and trained in the best environment.

Roberto vowed to one day expose Reinhardt's dirty true nature.

A few days later, Roberto headed to the temple's main auditorium during the weekend.

They said they were looking for the owner of Alsebringer.

He couldn't deny that he had a slight hope that it might be him.

If he were to become the owner of Alsebringer, what should he do?

As the rightful heir of Gardénia, it would be an honor for the sacred relic to choose him, but he worried if he should decline, as he had to prioritize his royal duties. And after that, he also had to find a political solution to the awkward relationship with the Als Religion.

Well, he could think as much as he wanted, and it wasn't impossible.

Roberto was entertaining such thoughts.

With that determination, Roberto de Gardénia was facing an unbelievable sight.

"..."

Uuuuuuung

Seeing Reinhardt, who had been chosen by Alsebringer, he couldn't shake the feeling that something had gone terribly wrong.

Alsebringer has...

Chosen Reinhardt...

Alsebringer's choice...

The surroundings were buzzing loudly.

However, watching the scene, Roberto felt something off in the expression of his unlucky senior, Reinhardt.

He had been chosen by the sacred relic.

And yet.

Somehow.

He looked like a man who had encountered something terribly unpleasant.

In front of the enormous honor of being chosen by the sacred relic, Reinhardt's expression was frozen.

Roberto couldn't help but sense it.

The intuition that this man was some other being, fundamentally different from himself.

—---

The hero's sword, Alsebringer.

An object that can summon the war god Als, but the price is one's life. Ragan Artorius summoned the war god to defeat the demon king and lost his life as a result.

There were only two relics in the original work.

Lament and Alsebringer. Ellen's sword, Lament, was a very sharp sword, not much different from an Aura Blade in terms of effect. Ellen couldn't draw out the true power of the relic.

The true power of Alsebringer is to summon the war god. In that sense, Alsebringer is a relic, but because it is too powerful on its own, the balance doesn't fit. That's why Lament also has a hidden true power, but Ellen just couldn't draw it out.

I was quite knowledgeable about Alsebringer.

Saturday.

The grand hall of the main building, where all the Royal Class members were gathered.

There weren't many people present.

The royal family was now searching for a new master of Alsebringer.

They might not choose the master from among the Royal Class members. If so, they would look for the master elsewhere.

"In the current situation, where the Demon King's forces are growing stronger, the empire needs a new hero. It is possible that one of the students here could be that person," the Emperor said while standing on the stage and looking at the gathered Royal Class members.

"If a master of Alsebringer is chosen from among you, you must keep this matter a complete secret. The Demon King will try to eliminate the next master of Alsebringer before they can become a threat."

They were looking for a new master of Alsebringer.

And if they found the master, their existence must be shrouded in utter secrecy.

It was no wonder everyone's expressions were tense. They could almost feel the presence of the Demon King, as if the name itself were pressing against their skin.

That's why the empire would search for a new hero among promising groups like the Knights or the Royal Class.

Thus, only a little less than two hundred people, including the Emperor and the high-ranking priests of the Als Religion, were present in the hall.

The process was complicated.

But the outcome was right before my eyes.

I was watching Alsebringer, floating in the air, waiting for me to grasp it.

Everyone was watching me, the chosen one of Alsebringer.

It should have been Ludwig's.

Originally, Alsebringer should have chosen Ludwig.

Would Alsebringer choose another master if I refused?

If I rejected it, and Alsebringer accepted my refusal and moved to another master, there was a high probability it would be Ludwig.

But how was that any different from telling Ludwig to die in my place?

Ludwig might not know the true power of Alsebringer, but he would naturally learn about it in time.

The inscription on the sword of Alsebringer shone brightly.

[Accomplished through sacrifice.]

The keyword of Alsebringer was sacrifice.

In fact, I had expected this.

This sword.

Alsebringer.

This sword chooses only those who are willing to die for the world as its master.

Everyone was watching me.

In the midst of some envious, astonished, and seemingly approving gazes.

Flash!

I grasped the sword of the War God. The brilliantly shining sword of the War God seemed to acknowledge me as its master, pouring out a fierce radiance.

Clap, clap, clap, clap

The Emperor.

The applause of Nelliod de Gardias echoed faintly throughout the hall.

Soon, numerous claps from others followed.

The situation was truly bitter.

Alsebringer.

To be precise.

I had been chosen by the very object that had killed my father.

—---

The fact that I had become the master of Alsebringer was to be shrouded in secrecy.

However, I couldn't be sure if the secret would be kept properly. A strict gag order had been placed upon everyone who had been present at the scene.

The empire had to guard this secret closely, lest I be targeted for assassination by the Demon King, and the Royal Class students who had witnessed the spectacle were also sternly demanded to keep the secret.

Without knowing that the one chosen by Alsebringer was the Demon King himself.

Anyway, although I concealed the fact that I was the master of Tiamata, a considerable number of people now knew I had become the master of Alsebringer.

It wasn't official, but I had become someone chosen by a sacred relic.

As expected, I had no choice but to have a private audience with the emperor, who had personally witnessed the ceremony to find the master of Alsebringer.

"Master of two sacred relics."

The emperor looked at me with a solemn expression.

"I wonder if I have a hero greater than Ragan Artorius before me."

Ragan Artorius also had two sacred relics, but he had only wielded one in his battle against the Demon King.

I couldn't find a response to the emperor's calm words.

In truth, Ellen also possessed two sacred relics, but we didn't mention it.

The emperor placed his hand on my shoulder. For him to touch my body directly was an immense honor.

"Reinhardt."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"..."

He just stared into my eyes for a while, not saying anything. It seemed he wanted to

say something, but his lips wouldn't part.

Finally.

"...You've become too important for me to make a personal request."

With that, he gave a bitter smile without answering what he had intended to say.

"I entrust you with the future of humanity."

It wasn't unintentional that he didn't use the term "the empire."

The future of humanity.

Yes.

The future that even transcended that - the future of the world.

That was what I desired.

"I will do my best, no matter what."

A nuclear weapon had been placed in my hands.

A nuclear weapon that had to be used alongside my own life.

The fact that it was a nuclear weapon remained unchanged.

—---

After encouraging me, the emperor quietly returned to the imperial palace. As if nothing had happened, despite the huge incident.

As if nothing had happened, the people gathered in the main hall dispersed, and I returned to the Royal Class dormitory.

"I'm not sure if this is something to congratulate you on."

"I think it's a headache. I already have one sacred relic."

"Exactly."

It seemed that Ellen didn't think my becoming the master of Alsebringer was such a good thing. Of course, it was great to have gained another sacred relic, but she seemed to worry that other people knowing about it might cause problems.

After saying that, Ellen suddenly changed the subject.

"First, talk to me later and go see Harriet now."

"Why Harriet?"

"She's crying."

What?

Why would she suddenly cry?

"Are you crying out of joy? Our Reinhardt has been chosen by the sacred artifact!"

What could be the reason for that?

But.

The reality was entirely different.

"Uhuhuhu!"

As soon as I entered the room, Harriet hugged me tightly and burst into tears.

"Don't do it, don't do anything, alright? Uhuhu! Uhuhuhu!"

Ah.

The sacred artifact had a different meaning for Harriet.

She doesn't know that I possess Tiamata.

Having become the owner of the sacred artifact, she intuits that I must inevitably fight the Demon King.

She fears that I might die.

That's why she was crying.

"I'm scared... I'm so scared, Reinhardt... Uhuhu! Huh! Huhuhu!"

"No... Why would I die from this?"

"Still... still..."

Harriet sobbed endlessly in my arms, as if the world was about to collapse.

"I won't die."

"If you die... You can't die, okay? Don't be reckless fighting the Demon King. You can't. Promise me. Promise..."

"Alright. Why would I do such a thing, huh? I won't die."

"Uhuhu... I... I'll become stronger too... I'll definitely... protect you..."

"Yes, yes."

Having become the owner of the sacred artifact that would kill me if I drew out its true power.

I assured Harriet that I wouldn't die.

—---

If this were a public event, it would have caused a huge uproar, and the name Reinhardt would have spread to every corner of the continent.

But due to the timing, things remained quiet even after Alsebringer, the sacred artifact, chose its new owner.

Even within the Royal Class dormitory, talking about Alsebringer was strictly forbidden. Teachers kept a tight watch on discussions, and the way my seniors and juniors looked at me changed, as if I were a being from a different dimension that commanded awe.

Of course, even though it was strictly forbidden, there were still plenty of opportunities to share stories.

Olivia came to visit me as well.

"..."

Having become the owner of the sacred artifact, it was inevitable for people to believe that I was destined to fight the Demon King. Just as Harriet did, Olivia felt the same way.

Olivia gently hugged me. Knowing why she did so, I couldn't push her away this time.

Olivia stroked my head.

Olivia was in a position where she had been saved by the Demon King. Therefore, if I were to fight the Demon King, Olivia would be in a difficult situation. It seemed that she didn't harbor any resentment towards the Demon King at the moment.

"I'm on your side."

"..."

"No matter what happens, I'm on your side."

It seemed she was prepared to become the enemy of the Demon King who saved her if I were to fight him.

However, her words had a completely different meaning to me now.

"I know."

Olivia Lanze.

Even if she knows that I am the Demon King, she will still be on my side.

—---

Everyone's gaze towards me had changed slightly.

Although I had taken something that should have belonged to Ludwig, he didn't know that Alsebringer was originally meant to be his.

Honestly, I don't feel much guilt about taking it.

If I were to hand it over to someone who's always ready to sacrifice themselves for humanity, they might end up using it against me.

It's right for both Ludwig and me that I become its owner.

"I'll work hard as well, so that I can be of at least some help to you."

"Alright."

Those were Ludwig's words.

"You really are amazing."

Cliffman said.

"If you kill the Demon King, I can marry you."

"What nonsense are you talking about?"

"Anyway, let's not die. Both of us."

Liana looked at me and abruptly said that, hitting my shoulder as she walked by.

"Amazing, Reinhardt. To think that even Alsebringer chose you."

Charlotte congratulated me with a bright smile, seemingly thinking that me becoming stronger couldn't be a bad thing.

And then.

"The owner of two sacred artifacts."

On the terrace, Bertus looked at me and said those words.

I thought he would find out someday, but as always, Bertus already knew.

CHAPTER 388

On the terrace, Bertus and I were enjoying tea together after a long time.

Two sacred artifacts.

He already knew I was the owner of Tiamata. I had somewhat anticipated it during Saviolin Turner's warning.

Bertus seemed like he wanted to say something, but hesitated slightly, as if the words were stuck in his throat.

His fingertips trembled.

You rascal.

Don't think about that again!

"……”

Not sure if he thought speaking itself would be a loss, Bertus smirked and said nothing.

"Well, never mind. That's not the important part. The fact that you were chosen by two sacred artifacts, that's the important part."

Right.

Let's erase that from all our minds.

I'm getting tired of feeling dizzy in this manner, and soon, the truly dizzying conversation would come up.

If you're chosen by two sacred artifacts, you must be an incredible person like Ragan Artorius, so why did you cross-dress?

I don't want to hear that!

Bertus stared at me with a serious expression.

"There's a lot I want to ask, Reinhardt."

“…Yeah, sure."

"Not that, but this rascal!"

"Uh, I didn't say anything?"

Bertus and I couldn't be serious with each other ever since that incident!

"Charlotte."

However, when her name was mentioned, I couldn't help but regain my composure.

"You did it, didn't you?"

He asked even though he knew.

I couldn't deny it. He didn't specifically ask what I did or how I did it. He probably didn't think it was necessary to go that far.

"Yes."

"Good, at least you didn't try to deny it meaninglessly."

He must already know everything about my actions and Charlotte's. Bertus mixed milk into his black tea and stirred it gently with a teaspoon.

"Reinhardt, I can't touch you now. You're not a fool, so I think you understand that much."

"…”

Not just one, but two sacred artifacts.

Killing me or harming me is out of the question. My existence has become too important, and the option to touch me has disappeared, even if I were on Charlotte's side.

The scary thing about Bertus is that.

He doesn't say how much he knows.

Whether he knows that I saved Charlotte's life, how I did it, or how much he knows about her current situation.

He doesn't reveal anything until suddenly, he acts as if it's obvious that he knows the halfway point of the truth.

It confuses the listener.

That's why I don't know how much I should say, and in the end, I might reveal more than Bertus knows.

It's a snake-like way of speaking.

"Reinhardt, you can be on Charlotte's side, but becoming my enemy is another choice. You can't be on both my side and Charlotte's, but just because you're on her side doesn't mean you have to be my enemy."

Bertus stared at me intently.

"Will you become my enemy? Let's just make that clear."

What would happen if I said I'd become his enemy?

Bertus wouldn't say anything about it. He might leave me alone for now, or he might try something.

"I don't plan on doing anything like that."

"Well, I hope so."

Things have changed since then.

I'm not just a Royal Class student—I possess two Sacred Relics. As long as others don't know that Ellen also has two, I am the only person in the world who owns two of them.

Just as I don't want to make Bertus my enemy, he has no choice but to not want me as his enemy either.

Bertus takes a sip of his milk tea.

"By the way, Reinhardt, do you know this?"

His expression turns cold.

"The struggle for the imperial succession has already ended."

Bertus declares with an icy expression.

"Charlotte cannot become the emperor."

It's not a surprising revelation.

Bertus had brought down the revolutionary forces, one of the biggest threats to the empire.

And that's not all.

While Charlotte struggled to maintain her own body, Bertus had dealt with countless matters.

In comparison to Charlotte, who had been overwhelmed by the aftermath of the Demon King's abduction, Bertus had proven his abilities time and time again. He continued to do so without my knowledge.

Charlotte, who could do nothing.

Bertus, who kept demonstrating something.

In such circumstances, the balance of imperial succession had gradually tilted, and after the revolutionary forces' incident, it had completely shifted to Bertus.

Of course, it's not publicly known, but the emperor would be aware of Bertus's accomplishments.

The die has been cast, and the outcome is already determined.

"Of course, aside from all that, Charlotte's path to becoming the emperor was already non-existent, simply due to the fact that the soul of the Demon King resides within her."

He knew that too.

The souls of the Demon King and Charlotte cannot be separated. As long as Bertus knows this, Charlotte's life would be forfeit with a single word from him.

"Reinhardt, I don't know if you'll believe me when I say this, but I don't want to kill my sister."

His excessively cold expression made the already hard-to-believe statement even more difficult to trust.

"What do you think the reason is?"

Because they're siblings.

That reason would certainly not be it. There must be another reason, which ultimately means not killing Charlotte would be the better option.

There's only one reason.

“…Is it because of me?"

"Yes."

If Charlotte is harmed, I will become Bertus's enemy. I've vowed to do so, and Bertus should know what I've done by now. And he's already told me he doesn't want to make me his enemy.

"If I have a reckless madman like you as an enemy, I'd feel a chill on my neck too."

Schoolyard ruffian Reinhardt has become Hero Reinhardt. The range and scale of what I can do have changed.

In plain terms, if Ragan Artorius were alive, no one in the world would have dared to treat Artorius casually, and no one would have wanted to be his enemy.

If Charlotte dies, I become their enemy.

So, Bertus argues that it is in his best interest not to kill Charlotte. Because my existence has become a stumbling block.

"But I can't not kill Charlotte."

“…Why?"

"Because there's no reason to keep her alive. Charlotte's mere existence already affects my imperial power. So, if Charlotte is alive, whether I become the next emperor or ascend the throne, people around me will clamor hundreds of times a day for me to kill Charlotte. They'll keep shouting that in my ear for days, months, and years, and my close associates won't be able to understand my refusal. And subordinates tend to prefer a cruel ruler over a hesitant one. Because at least it's certain. I can't risk arousing suspicion among my associates by keeping Charlotte, a strong contender for imperial power, alive for no particular reason, can I?"

A powerful heir to the imperial power poses a threat to the throne if they survive after being eliminated. There's a real possibility of supporters rallying to make Charlotte the ruler, and if Bertus makes a mistake, a movement to establish a new emperor could emerge.

There's no reason to keep Charlotte alive, and Bertus will inevitably have to kill her regardless of his own wishes.

I don't want to kill her. But I must.

Charlotte had said the same thing.

If she doesn't become the emperor, she'll have no choice but to die.

From the beginning, the battle between the two was a fight to become emperor or die. They couldn't decide each other's fate through their own will in these two diverging paths.

If one survives, they must kill the other.

But if Bertus kills Charlotte, he creates an enemy in me.

"It's a headache, you see. If you die fighting the Demon King, that's one thing, but if things work out and you kill the Demon King and become humanity's hero, I don't know what crazy things you might do to me. If I kill you after you've become humanity's hero by killing the Demon King… then there's no emperor, no anything. What would happen if the emperor killed Ragan Artorius, who had come back to life? That's exactly what I'd be facing."

He speaks these harsh words nonchalantly.

He calmly says that the best thing for him would be if I annihilate the Demon King and died while doing so like Ragan Artorius.

Of course, if I were a true hero, Bertus might be afraid to stab me in the neck, but physically, I can't fight the Demon King.

Bertus must kill Charlotte.

But if he does, a very dangerous situation will arise.

"So even if Charlotte ends up being killed, it can't be helped… Understand that… What? What are you saying?"

At my words, Bertus lowered his head.

"There's no way you would accept that."

As if to say that wasn't the case, Bertus showed a bitter smile.

"Didn't I say there's no reason?"

"…You did."

There is no reason to keep Charlotte alive.

Hence, his close aides will argue that Charlotte must be killed to solidify the imperial power, and Bertus has no words to refute that.

"That's why we need a pretext."

A reason, in other words, a pretext.

"A pretext for not having to kill my sibling."

A pretext for Bertus not to kill Charlotte even if he becomes the emperor. A pretext for the close aides not to demand the killing of Charlotte.

Bertus stirred his teacup with a bitter smile.

From the issue of Charlotte's soul, it all comes back to a political problem.

A girl who must die no matter which path she takes.

Charlotte de Gardias.

"Do you want to save my sibling's life?"

Last time, you saved Charlotte from the darkness, so will you try to save her from the political situation where she must die?

At Bertus's question, I nodded without lying.

"Yes."

"By any means?"

"By any means."

Bertus chuckled.

"Marry my sibling."

The prophecy of Dettomorian.

"There's no other way."

I finally realized that it had foreseen this situation.

And.

I had no choice but to know what personal favor the emperor was going to ask of me.

However, a question arose.

"Then, doesn't the pretext of being an imperial heir that Charlotte has also become stronger?"

Despite what he said, Bertus has no reason to keep Charlotte alive.

He doesn't want to make me his enemy, but marrying someone with a sacred relic gives power to Charlotte.

"That's true."

Bertus must have some idea. He certainly won't be doing anything good for Charlotte.

But he didn't tell me what that idea was.

Or could it be that he really feels compassion for Charlotte?

—---

Bertus was already certain of his victory, knowing that it couldn't be overturned.

And I knew that too.

Even without Bertus's existence, it's uncertain whether Charlotte could become the emperor. Charlotte, who has become one with the demon king's soul, can't control the power of darkness completely, and people will find out she has become the owner of ominous power.

By that alone, leaving aside all other matters, Charlotte can't become the emperor.

That's why Bertus no longer perceives Charlotte as a competitor. However, if he succumbs to the pressure of his close aides and kills Charlotte, he would create an enemy of the nation.

Bertus is saying that.

I am somewhat afraid.

I am the master of Alsebringer and Tiamata.

If Charlotte marries me, my status will rise, but Charlotte will be the one who becomes safer.

If the battle with the Demon King becomes imminent, there is no way my existence can remain hidden.

The hero of humanity, the hope of mankind.

Such epithets will inevitably be attached to me.

And if Charlotte becomes my wife, the empire will be unable to touch her, just as they cannot touch me. Whether Bertus becomes emperor or not, there will be no talk of killing Charlotte before I die.

The emperor must know this as well. That is why he hesitated to ask me for such a favor and ultimately refrained from doing so. My presence had become too heavy for him to request something for personal reasons.

Charlotte must also be aware of this fact.

To save Charlotte, I have to marry her. Now that Alsebringer has also fallen into my hands, my standing has grown even stronger.

That is why Bertus brought up the conversation. He must be wary of what a man who possesses not one but two sacred relics might do if he went rogue.

But can I really make such a decision regardless of Charlotte's wishes?

What exactly are Bertus's intentions?

-Kaang!

"What are you thinking about?"

“…Ah, nothing. Just…”

"Hand."

As I stumbled backward, Ellen helped me back up.

What should I do?

I have sworn countless times to protect Charlotte at all costs, but now I must do even this. If I don't, there's no way to save her.

Is this really the right thing to do?

CHAPTER 389

No matter what, I had to speak with Charlotte.

Due to her research on soul manipulation magic, Charlotte often had to stay at the palace. It seemed that she had returned to the palace after observing who Alsebringer had chosen and congratulating me.

Saturday night.

Now, I could enter the palace whenever I pleased.

However, I didn't stand at the main entrance of the palace but held the artifact Charlotte had given me in front of the warp gate.

Bertus already knew most of the truth and didn't actually want to kill Charlotte.

Nevertheless, the fact that I needed to be cautious remained unchanged. Even if it wasn't Bertus, Charlotte could get into unnecessary trouble due to the record of me visiting the Spring Palace in the middle of a weekend night.

I intended to use the warp gate to the Spring Palace's underground that Charlotte had given me.

As Charlotte had instructed, I activated the brooch-shaped artifact and entered the warp gate using priority access.

And soon, I was able to exit the warp gate.

A dark, yet not completely lightless, underground space.

An artifact that could interfere with the set path and lead to a completely different gate.

It was my first time using it, but it felt dangerous even as I did.

Ascending the long staircase leading up from the Spring Palace's underground, I

soon saw a button that could activate a secret door in the wall.

But wait.

Why did I feel like I had committed a crime using this item she had given me to use?

Charlotte had said to come anytime, and I really did come at any time.

What if she was changing her clothes or sleeping?

If I entered while she was asleep, that would also be a bit awkward.

But didn't I get permission? There shouldn't be a problem using the item she gave me for that purpose, right?

It's like coming home late from work and finding your wife asleep at home, right?

No, we're not a married couple yet!

Yet doesn't necessarily mean we will be!

I don't know.

Click

Upon pressing the button, the wall opened smoothly and silently, revealing the interior of Charlotte's bedroom.

Fortunately, I didn't encounter an embarrassing situation where Charlotte was in the middle of changing her clothes and screamed upon seeing me.

However.

I could see that her bed had definitely become smaller since my last visit.

She had complained that it was too big and uncomfortable and that she would change it eventually. It seemed she really had changed it. Of course, it was still quite large, but not to the extent that one had to crawl around on it.

On that bed.

Charlotte lay asleep, in a straight posture, looking up at the ceiling.

But she looked slightly different than usual.

Her hair was dyed black.

As I approached, I could see her more clearly.

It wasn't like the previous time, with darkness flowing and fluttering around her.

Instead, Charlotte, who seemed to have dyed her hair black, breathed evenly and slept peacefully.

The Demon King's ego had been blown away by my command, leaving only her power behind.

The fusion of the mysterious force and Charlotte's soul slowly progressed, now nearly complete.

Because of this, Charlotte didn't go berserk, nor did she break out in cold sweat.

It was as if the power had not caused a seizure, but had instead naturally become one with her.

Though the force had corroded her, Charlotte merely slept peacefully.

Regardless of the soul-absorption magic, Charlotte would be fine. United with the Demon Lord.

But was this truly a good thing?

I didn't know.

"Charlotte."

I softly called out to her.

If she could be fine like this, there would be no need for another method.

"Charlotte, it's me."

"Uhm…?"

Hearing someone calling her name, Charlotte, with her black hair, furrowed her brows and stirred.

"Hey."

In the end, when I called her teasingly, Charlotte narrowed her eyes and opened them.

"Uh… huh?"

Charlotte and my eyes met.

No, wait.

In this dark room, wouldn't I look like a stranger who had intruded into the room?

As I watched Charlotte's eyes widen in fear,

"Ah… Huh! Uh!"

I quickly covered her mouth, afraid she might scream.

But the moment I did that,

A question arose in my mind: How was this any different from an unforgivable crime?

Unable to recognize me, fear filled Charlotte's eyes.

That's right.

Charlotte had been kidnapped by Sarkegaar once.

As fear drove her rationality away, a deep darkness began to flow from Charlotte's hair.

And then, dozens of dark spears materialized in mid-air, aimed right at me.

-Hiss!

This.

I was going to die.

"It's me! Me! Reinhardt!"

"!"

The dozens of dark spears targeting me stopped just before they could skewer me, and I saw it all clearly.

I hadn't even had a chance to explain myself after covering Charlotte's mouth, everything happened within a second.

I really.

I really almost met a ridiculous end.

—---

"I'm sorry, Reinhardt…"

"No… It's understandable. I was the one who showed up suddenly."

"I should have considered that it could be you, but I was too surprised…"

I received an apology from the homeowner even though I had intruded without permission. Charlotte apologized profusely, not even checking her own condition, too shocked that she had almost killed me.

"I told you to come, and then this happened… I'll be more careful from now on. I haven't had a visitor like this before…"

"I should have let you know I was coming. It's understandable that you were startled. You're not hurt, either."

"I gave you my permission to come anytime… Um. Hmm. What…?"

Only then did Charlotte seem to realize her current state, her eyes widening in surprise.

"What… is this?"

"That's right, you should be more concerned about your own condition."

As she ran her fingers through her hair and saw that it had turned black, Charlotte hurriedly stood in front of the full-length mirror in her bedroom.

The owner's hair had turned jet black, and her eyes were no longer the usual golden hue but now bore black irises.

Charlotte's fingertips trembled. She was being crushed by the terror of being consumed by this power once again.

"Again… again…"

"Calm down, Charlotte. It will be alright soon."

By now, they knew that when Charlotte was in this state, it was only a psychological issue that triggered her episodes.

As I hugged her shoulders, Charlotte turned her gaze away from the mirror and buried her face in my chest.

"Like last time, no one is controlling your consciousness. It just happens sometimes, and in reality, nothing will happen. Trust me."

"Y-yeah… yeah."

Although the outward change could arouse suspicion in others, it could also eventually become controllable.

Of course, even though she knew it wasn't a big deal, the fact that she had changed scared Charlotte. She trembled for a very long time and continued to break out in a cold sweat.

After comforting her for quite a while, Charlotte finally stopped shaking.

However, her black hair did not return to its original color.

Holding a handful of her now blackened hair in her hand, Charlotte muttered blankly.

"It feels… so strange."

Feeling something controlling her consciousness must have been eerie, but after calming down and realizing there was no actual threat, that sensation would have faded.

Perhaps it was a reaction to a sense of crisis, but Charlotte even used her powers to attack me. It seemed as though she was instinctively learning how to control the Demon King's power.

"Um, is there something urgent?"

Rather than her own problems, Charlotte seemed more curious about the purpose of my late-night visit. She looked at me, putting down the hand that had been playing with her hair.

I wondered how to start and what to say.

I had heard various things from Bertus: if I don't marry you, you will inevitably die.

What kind of expression would Charlotte make if she heard that?

Would she be disgusted by the idea of receiving sympathy from Bertus?

"Let's say your condition improves."

I didn't start with that subject directly. Charlotte nodded at my words.

"Yeah. I hope so."

"Then, will all problems be solved?"

"…"

Charlotte's expression darkened in an instant.

"Then, from now on, can we live without any problems? Live safely?"

At my question,

Charlotte could not give any answer.

—---

Charlotte was not in a condition where she could devote herself to the issue of imperial succession.

Firstly, she had been focusing her efforts on finding Valier. Secondly, she was in a state where she could be consumed by the Demon King's soul at any time, so she was busy just taking care of herself.

As a result, the gap had widened too much, and Bertus had achieved an overwhelmingly significant accomplishment. The things she did to survive ultimately became the title of an imperial successor who had done nothing.

It was an inevitability.

It was simply a matter of inevitability, and Charlotte received no bonus points for her circumstances.

"Have you heard anything from Bertus?"

"…"

I couldn't bring myself to say no.

"It might have been decided like this since the moment she returned alive from the Demon King's castle."

Even if Charlotte hadn't wasted time searching for Valier, she would still have been unable to overcome the aftereffects of the spell cast on her by the Demon King.

It was just a predetermined sequence of events.

"It's true that my position has become quite unstable. The people who supported me are now paying attention to Bertus rather than me."

Though they can't join Bertus's side, now that Charlotte's defeat is certain, they're more concerned with Bertus's opinion than Charlotte's.

Even the inner circle might have some idea that there is a serious issue with Charlotte, considering that the Spring Palace has been closed for unknown reasons.

It must be difficult to trust a lord whose ordinary life is unstable.

Above all, the moderates in Charlotte's camp must have all sided with Bertus, the strong candidate for the next emperor, after seeing her situation.

"If Bertus becomes the emperor, it might be my own people, not his servants, who will try to kill me. They might try to obtain a pardon with my life."

There's no need for Bertus's confidants to order Charlotte's execution.

Conflict within Charlotte's forces could lead them to kill her. In that case, it wouldn't be Bertus who kills Charlotte, so he would claim he had not harmed her.

Although the relationship between Bertus and Charlotte hasn't improved, it was clear that his hostility towards her has diminished since he has essentially already won.

"I'm not sure. If I can resolve my situation, I might be fine at least during my time at the temple."

Charlotte looks at me and smiles.

"Do you remember what the emperor said? If anything happens to either of us, the other's right to succession will be revoked."

“…Yes."

When we were freshmen, the emperor had sent a decree with such content to the Temple Royal Class.

"So, at least for a few years, there won't be any major issues."

At least five years, until we graduate from the temple. Of course, that's if nothing significant happens to the emperor during that time. The statement itself could

become meaningless as time passes.

"And during those years, the situation could change as well…"

Charlotte trailed off as she said that. In the next few years, if Charlotte accomplishes something, the situation could change.

Her words are true.

However, even Charlotte's supporters are beginning to detect the outcome and turn their backs. They need to turn away quickly to remain safe from the next emperor's displeasure.

Once the foundation is lost, it's already over. There won't be another chance.

So, Charlotte's words are just an excuse.

An excuse to reassure me.

The people from Bertus would not harm Charlotte, but if Charlotte's followers were to act recklessly, there would be no way to handle it.

The idea of being safe for a few years might very well turn out to be false.

She might not even graduate from the Temple unscathed.

But at least for a few years, she could live free from the Demon King's soul.

Charlotte is lying to me.

"Reinhardt."

"…Yes?"

"I was originally living on borrowed time."

Charlotte looks at me as she says that.

"Though I was nothing more than a pawn, if I could live by my own will… if I could live like that for a few years…"

Charlotte looks at me with a sad smile.

"That's enough for me."

A reprieve after another reprieve.

Having struggled to escape a life of borrowed time, she thought that the next reprieve, though it would be brief, was better. That it would be enough to satisfy her.

Charlotte had resigned herself.

She was fed up.

What was the empire, the royal family, and the emperor?

Even if Bertus no longer wanted to kill Charlotte, she would still have to die. In fact, the likelihood of Charlotte dying without Bertus lifting a finger was extremely high.

She was born with the potential to wield great power and with it, the penalty of death if she could not attain that power.

Mercy could not be allowed, as it soon became weakness.

Charlotte quietly grasped my hand.

"Reinhardt."

She looked at me with sad eyes.

"You've already sacrificed so much for me. I haven't done anything for you, yet you've done so much for me. With everything I've received so far, I could never repay you in a lifetime."

Charlotte gently stroked the back of my hand.

"I don't know what you're thinking, but please don't sacrifice anything else for me."

Charlotte could not help but know that I had something in mind, which was why I had entered her bedroom in the dead of night so urgently.

"As your friend, I ask you."

I felt her regard me as more than a friend, but Charlotte ultimately used the term "friend."

—---

Charlotte prevented me from saying anything further.

It seemed she didn't want me to sacrifice for her any longer.

Charlotte was losing her influence. Politically, she would become more and more isolated, and the things she could do would decrease.

But Charlotte did not want me to sacrifice any more for her.

No one knew that I had become the master of Alsebringer, and in that situation, marrying Charlotte would not change anything. If that were to happen, the fact that I was the master of Tiamata and Alsebringer would have to be revealed as well.

To save Charlotte, I would have to bear the burden of making my name known to the public.

I could not leave Charlotte's bedroom and sat quietly in the chair beside her bed.

In the darkness, Charlotte lay on her bed, staring blankly at the ceiling. Her body, dyed with black hair, returned to its original state after closing her eyes and taking a few deep breaths.

She seemed to have grown almost entirely accustomed to the control of her power.

"If it's already over, I wonder if I really need to give up this power. It is a strong power, after all."

Even if it was an evil and unstable power that was losing its foundation, perhaps it still needed to be retained. Charlotte seemed to be coming to that conclusion.

“…That might be true."

At my words, Charlotte smiled sadly.

Though it was a power that had nearly destroyed her, Charlotte's current situation was one where she was increasingly forced to rely on this power.

Just a moment ago, if I had truly been an intruder, Charlotte would have been able to kill the intruder with the Demon King's power and survive on her own.

On the contrary, if she were to be freed from the Demon King's soul, she would become incapable of even her last line of defense: self-preservation.

Both Charlotte and I know this.

That's why, even though Charlotte realized that I was the one who had actually infiltrated her room, she seemed to have realized that if she were to face a real intruder or assassin, the only power she could rely on was the cursed power the Demon King had imbued her with.

"Nothing ever goes as planned."

Charlotte laughed weakly as she turned her head to look at me.

Since being kidnapped and taken to the Demon King's castle, life must have been hell for Charlotte. She searched for Valier but couldn't meet him again, and ultimately discovered that Valier was the heir to the Demon King.

In the end, she lost the competition for the throne.

Although she wanted to rid herself of the Demon King's soul that was lingering within her, she now finds herself in a situation where she might have to rely on it.

"Charlotte…"

"Still, there's one thing."

Charlotte quietly took my hand.

"There's one good thing that's come from things not going according to plan."

Charlotte pulled my hand toward her and embraced me as if holding me to her chest.

"Us growing closer."

An A-class delinquent with a bad attitude, and the heir to a criminal organization.

Charlotte and I, who had once thought of each other as human trash, had somehow grown close enough to be together like this, in the royal bedroom during a spring night.

Neither of us had anticipated this.

This, too, was something that didn't go according to plan.

"I'm incredibly grateful for that."

Even if not everything went according to plan.

It didn't seem like Charlotte thought she had failed in everything.

There was still a way to save Charlotte.

We didn't know how many years of reprieve we might have, but there was always the possibility that one of Charlotte's traitorous followers might try to take her life tomorrow.

It could be a real threat or even poison.

We might lose this smile.

Though it was a sad smile, losing that smile would be unbearable.

Losing Charlotte forever.

I couldn't bear that.

"Let's do this, then."

"Huh? Do what?"

I placed my hand on Charlotte's cheek.

"Let's only do half a marriage."

"Huh? Half a marriage? What does that mean?"

Knowing full well that this decision would change so much.

"An engagement would be enough."

"Huh?"

I couldn't lose what I had managed to protect so far.

CHAPTER 390

"Let's get engaged. We don't have to get married yet. It's to give you a temporary status."

It wasn't because I was afraid of Bertus's power, but to prevent Charlotte's close associates from changing their minds.

I said it with the intention of putting out an urgent fire. Lying down, Charlotte looked up at me, biting her lip.

"Why… why are you going this far?"

As if I was doing so for her, Charlotte brought her hand to my cheek.

Her slightly cold body temperature was transmitted to my cheek.

"I… I'm not the one you have to go this far for… It's not me, but…"

"You're precious."

"…"

"You're precious to me."

My head was swirling with countless emotions and thoughts, but that was all I could say.

"Then it's settled."

This is a wrong choice.

With this choice, no one can be happy; it only secures someone's survival. Is that enough?

Is it right to leave Charlotte to die?

Is this situation, where I choose the lesser of two evils rather than the worst, truly right?

In the end, Charlotte distorted her face, looking at me as she said those words, tightly closing her eyes, and starting to shed tears.

"Reinhardt… I'm so, so… grateful…”

Charlotte sobbed.

"But… it's so… sad…”

She was sad because she knew I had made this choice not because I loved her, but to protect her.

—---

I couldn't spend the night at the Spring Palace, so I returned to the temple again. Of course, it was through the warp gate in the basement of the Spring Palace.

It wasn't officially discussed, but I had decided to get engaged to Charlotte.

I didn't know how or in what way, but it was a promise between Charlotte and me.

In a situation where there were only wrong answers, I felt like I had chosen the lesser of two evils.

Since we had decided to get engaged, I couldn't make a decision about this issue alone.

I had to create a justification for how I, who was merely a student of the Temple Royal Class, could become the prince consort of the royal family.

Soon.

It had to be revealed that I was the owner of the Alsebringer. However, just because I had decided to do so didn't mean it was immediately possible.

That's why I had to meet the most important person.

"Engagement… you say?"

"Yes, Your Majesty."

Looking at the situation, it was very audacious.

A mere commoner dared to request an audience with the emperor, then offered to become engaged to the princess.

But in reality, the emperor intended to ask me first, but couldn't bring himself to do it. I just said it before he did.

It was engagement, not marriage.

The emperor closed his eyes and pondered in front of me, seemingly trying to gauge the gap created by that difference.

"Can you handle it?"

He didn't ask what I could handle.

But there was so much contained in that single word, 'handle'.

It was true that Bertus had personally requested it, but the question was whether he could handle Bertus.

If it became public knowledge that he was the new master of Alsebringer, he might attract the attention of the Demon King.

And, in doing so, his relationships with others would become tangled and fall apart.

At first, he had risked his life for Charlotte, and he had risked it again for her.

But now, he had to risk everything.

His life and everything else.

It felt like the same thing, but in fact, it had a completely different meaning to him.

Even Charlotte seemed to be saddened, rather than pleased, by his decision. Perhaps

because it seemed to emphasize her own miserable situation.

"Yes, I can handle it."

His feelings were complicated, but his answer was simple.

He would protect Charlotte. This time, he would finally save her completely with his own hands.

"Thank you… Reinhardt."

This was the second time he had received gratitude from the Emperor.

It should have been a glorious moment, but it didn't feel that way.

—---

He discussed the engagement with the Emperor.

To the outside world, he was still an ordinary student. If the news of his engagement to Charlotte were revealed, it would create a bizarre scandal about a commoner becoming engaged to the princess.

It was necessary for him to be known as the new master of Alsebringer to some extent.

He didn't know exactly how to proceed with this matter, but it was necessary to move forward before Charlotte became even more vulnerable. At least now, she was able to control her powers and would be safe from physical attacks.

And then.

He didn't know how to explain this to the others.

They would all find it incomprehensible.

He didn't expect to be understood.

But since he didn't know how to explain it, he felt trapped and helpless.

So far, only he, the Emperor, and Charlotte knew about this matter.

If there were any more, it would be Bertus, who had made the proposal in the first place.

After the weekend, the following week.

Saviolin Turner called both him and Ellen.

"From now on, I will be in charge of both your major classes."

Both he and Ellen had their major classes replaced entirely.

They both had anticipated it to some extent.

Although their major classes had already been replaced by combat training, their real training had to be based on using sacred artifacts. Moreover, he had to bring out Alsebringer.

Temporary instructor Saviolin Turner ultimately took on the role of their regular instructor as well, solely to teach the two of them.

"When I have other duties, someone else will be in charge of your classes."

"Yes."

"Yes."

He felt that Turner was gradually distancing herself from his role as Charlotte's bodyguard, perhaps due to being pushed out of the competition for succession. However, he couldn't be certain.

Their training location with Saviolin Turner was not the dormitory's training ground.

"Normally, this facility is not to be used casually, but you two have been granted permission. I'll register your access to the facility, so feel free to come here and train on your own."

Saviolin Turner brought us to the temple's high-ranking combat training grounds.

Such a place.

The combat training grounds employed the same system as the main stadium during the temple tournament. It was a training ground where a recall artifact would activate just before one suffered a fatal injury, even when fighting with full strength.

The construction cost was immense, and the maintenance cost was also enormous, so it was a place where not just anyone could use. In fact, even the Royal Class exclusive lessons were not held here.

Unlike the open-air main stadium, we entered the training grounds wearing the safety artifacts.

Ellen summoned Lament, and I summoned Alsebringer and Tiamata.

"…"

Saviolin Turner looked at me and made a thoughtful expression.

Anyway, since I have them, I summoned both.

Me.

Do I have to practice dual swordsmanship now?

“…This is a headache."

"I think so too."

"Indeed."

Ellen nodded her head in agreement.

"Living with two divine artifacts and worrying about whether to use both or just one is a first for you… well, maybe not the first. Anyway, should I call this a fortunate dilemma?"

Turner corrected herself after remembering the case of Ragan Artorius and glanced at Ellen.

It seemed Saviolin Turner was also unsure whether to start practicing such an odd thing as dual swordsmanship from now on, or to focus on one and exchange the artifacts as needed.

"Your opinion is important. What do you plan to do?"

Tiamata and Alsebringer.

Both are very powerful divine artifacts.

Saviolin Turner seemed very negative about dual swordsmanship. I wanted to use both, but I didn't want to throw away everything I had done so far and start learning from the beginning.

Isn't dual swordsmanship not about adding one more attack method but rather losing the freedom of the left hand?

How about this, can't I combine them into one?

Won't they combine if I rename it to something like Alstiama?

Obviously, such a thing didn't happen.

I sent Tiamata back.

"I'll stick with one. Trying to force myself to use both might end up making me unable to use either properly."

"That's a wise decision, Reinhardt."

If I tried to change my body by forcing myself to use both, everything I had built up so far would be ruined.

First of all, it is a priority to experience the basic abilities of Alsebringer.

—---

Although I didn't set it up entirely, divine artifacts generally have two powers.

Inherent abilities and true abilities.

In the case of Tiamata, it inherently has a very powerful demon-slaying power. The true ability is to use an enormous amount of divine power at will. There is also the somewhat special situation of having Olivia's help.

In the case of Lament, it has an effect similar to an aura blade, but I don't know its true effect yet.

I confirmed that Lapelt has something similar to aura armor last time, and I don't know its true ability either.

And Alsebringer.

The true power is summoning the war god.

Clang!

"Argh!"

As my Alsebringer clashed with Ellen's Lament, she stepped back half a pace.

Despite the significant gap in strength between Ellen and me, this exchange took place.

Clang! Clang!

After several more exchanges of swordplay, Ellen continued to retreat.

The true power of Alsebringer is to summon the Avatar of the War God, but Alsebringer doesn't exist solely for that purpose.

The basic effect of Alsebringer is simple.

The stronger my enemy is compared to me,

And the more enemies I have to face,

The stronger it makes its wielder.

It possesses a potent basic effect befitting the name of the War God's sword.

Of course, this is just a plot device created for the protagonist to easily defeat stronger opponents.

The Alsebringer, which was devised for that purpose, is now in my hands.

Of course.

As with all such plot devices, it cannot grant invincibility.

It makes its wielder stronger.

However, that ambiguous statement does not guarantee victory against a stronger opponent.

It makes you stronger when your enemies are more powerful or numerous, but it never said it would ensure victory.

Of course, it can help you win, but there's also the possibility it won't.

A powerful artifact with ambiguous conditions.

Such ambiguity is convenient for storytelling.

Whoosh!

Ellen's Lament grazes my sword at a rough, yet precise angle, aiming to pierce my throat.

Thud!

And with that, I was recalled outside the training ground.

In a real battle, even with Magic Body Strengthening, my throat would have been slashed, and I would have died.

Ellen is much stronger than me.

So, even though Alsebringer made me much stronger, I still couldn't compete.

Ten battles, ten losses.

"Haa… Haa…”

I was nearly breathless outside the training ground.

Exhausted.

In a real fight, I would have died ten times to Ellen.

"The power of the artifact is definitely noticeable. You withstood about fifteen more exchanges on average than usual."

Saviolin Turner, who had been observing the entire situation from outside the training ground, nodded silently. While I still lost as usual, the frequency of pushing Ellen back had increased.

Ellen, who returned to the waiting room, was drenched in sweat, her hair sticking to her forehead.

"That was tough."

It was an intense ten battles for Ellen to say that.

"Imagine how I feel since I lost."

Ellen hadn't even used her Lapelt. In a real fight, I wouldn't have stood a chance, which implies just that.

Is there a way to use Alsebringer and Tiamata simultaneously? If I were to sheathe one on my waist or back, could I utilize both of their reinforcement effects?

“Reinhardt, you often experience situations where your enhanced abilities, including your physical prowess, increase. As a result, it's difficult for you to accurately gauge your athletic capabilities at any given moment. This often leads to situations where you rely on brute force, and you tend to become flustered when your opponents pushed back. You must become accustomed to how much your physical abilities increase in different situations."

Both Ellen and I, exhausted, sat side by side on a bench, listening to Turner's feedback.

"Ellen, you have nothing to critique."

"Thank you."

No.

The feedback was only for me.

Saviolin Turner's favoritism towards me no longer exists.

It's not that Turner is disappointed with me.

'Should I say something to Ellen too? If I only criticize Reinhardt… '

'I can't deliberately criticize Ellen just to keep Reinhardt's spirits up.'

'What should I do?'

'I want to praise her.'

She wants to show favoritism, but she can't.

In all fairness, I am the one who was defeated even with my supernatural abilities and self-enhancement artifact.

Although Ellen also has Lament, the Alsebringer—an unbreakable sword—doesn't provide a significant advantage in sharpness. It would be a different story if she were an Aura Blade wielder like Turner, capable of creating magical fluctuations from the sword itself.

In a way, Ellen physically overpowers me, who is armed with all sorts of cheats.

Still.

"Haa… Haa…"

Watching Ellen, drenched in sweat and panting heavily.

Somehow.

It felt as if she was keeping up.

No matter how much she relies on equipment.

And every time I looked at Ellen, an uncomfortable feeling occupied a part of my heart.

A sense of guilt, that kind of unease.

CHAPTER 391

We became treated as special students among the royal class.

Though we usually attend only our major classes on the days they are held, all other classes were canceled, and we received combat training from Saviolin Turner all day long. We were told not to worry about things like credits, as that would be taken care of for us.

Both Ellen and I sparred with each other, but eventually, we also engaged in duels with Saviolin Turner.

Certainly, my abilities increased more substantially when facing Saviolin Turner while wielding the Alsebringer.

However, it didn't make me a Swordmaster.

I was very pleased with the basic ability of the Alsebringer, which made me stronger as my opponent became stronger.

It was as if I had stolen the protagonist's exclusive cheat.

And then there was the problem Turner pointed out.

When facing Saviolin Turner, my physical abilities increased excessively, making me unable to control my movements and causing me to trip over myself. This created situations where I became so strong that it became a problem.

"Ugh!"

"Be careful!"

Thud!

"Cough!"

As I was about to fall after getting tangled in my own feet, she grabbed my collar and

helped me regain my proper posture.

I briefly wondered if I could win against Ellen in the state I was in while facing Saviolin Turner, but it was pointless.

In this messed-up state, it was clear that I would lose even more miserably than before.

I stared quietly at the Alsebringer in my right hand.

"…"

"Don't feel bad. It's natural to be unaccustomed to something you've never used before."

I had to get used to obtaining physical abilities that surpassed my own level.

The Alsebringer granted an extremely powerful yet ambiguous buff, making me stronger as my opponent became stronger. Therefore, it was crucial to properly recognize how much my physical abilities were enhanced and to adjust my body accordingly.

If I couldn't control this power, not using the Alsebringer might even be better in some situations.

"Let's try again."

"Yes."

I didn't know whether I would need to unleash the true power of the Alsebringer later on.

But the Alsebringer itself was already a very powerful artifact.

I had to become accustomed to this power.

—---

Saviolin Turner trained us in various ways.

Duels between Ellen and me.

She directly engaged in one-on-one duels with Ellen and me.

After giving us feedback, she taught us how to coordinate our attacks.

I could never defeat Ellen, and of course, I couldn't defeat Saviolin Turner either, and the same went for coordinated attacks.

But Turner, who claimed to be unaccustomed to teaching, was by no means a bad instructor.

That wasn't all.

"I'll teach you the principles of conduct when isolated in a field situation."

She also taught us not only combat but also how to survive and sustain the fight in real-life situations, such as guerrilla warfare and survival methods when isolated in enemy territory.

This was a lesson that would have been taught in the Temple's combat major course, which had now been adapted for battle training.

Of course, that was not her role. It was simply because the situation of Ellen and me being educated by her was top secret that Saviolin Turner took on the role of a teacher in every aspect.

We learned methods of infiltrating enemy lines, bypassing magical barriers, and how to act in an unfamiliar territory.

The two of us learned not how to work with someone on a mission but to survive on our own, and about things like assassination.

That's what it meant to be a hero.

An assassin who infiltrates the enemy lines and cuts the enemy leader's throat.

In fact, what Ragan Artorius had done was not much different. Therefore, Saviolin Turner taught us as assassins rather than soldiers.

"Of course, the Demon King might be scheming not in Darkland but on the human continent. And even if we find him, he might be able to escape through teleportation. I'll teach you how to deal with that situation and urban warfare soon."

Saviolin Turner seemed to plan on teaching us many things, such as how to find hidden enemies in human cities and how to fight in urban areas.

We weren't just learning swordsmanship.

However, somehow,

When learning about hunting methods, one naturally learns about escape methods as well.

Soon, I was learning about escape methods rather than hunting.

—---

In a place dominated by eternal winter.

The Vampire Council.

"Antirianus, how is it progressing?"

"It's a very high-dimensional magic, so it may take some time to design, but the mages of the Order are quite exceptional. It shouldn't take too long."

Antirianus answered Eleris's question.

The construction of dungeons and labyrinths in Darkland was going smoothly. Both the Black Order and Antirianus were greatly interested in the grimoire called Quantum Maze. It was a magic perfectly suited to the current situation and goal.

"It's intriguing. How did you obtain such a powerful grimoire?"

"I'm afraid I cannot answer that."

"Heh, you don't trust me too much, do you?"

At Antirianus's seemingly hurt attitude, Eleris sighed deeply. She could not share the

location of the grimoire with someone who seemed ready to break into the Demon King's underground library the moment he found out about it, and Eleris had no authority to decide on such matters.

Lately, the Vampire Council held frequent meetings. It was because of their cooperative relationship with the Demon King that the Council meetings, which usually took place once every few years or even decades, were held so often.

"Did Lucinil enroll in the Temple without any issues?"

"Yes."

Lucinil nodded with a smile at Luruien's question. Lucinil had just finished class at the Temple and attended the Council meeting immediately via teleportation.

"Even though it's necessary, isn't it inconvenient? It must be difficult."

"Why is this such a hardship? I'm living surrounded by cute and lovely creatures!"

“…You know, Lucinil? Sometimes I find you even more difficult to understand than Antirianus."

"I pity your dry sensibility, unable to appreciate cuteness."

"Enough with the words."

In terms of causing mischief, Lucinil was as much a partner in crime as Antirianus. Of course, it was true that Lucinil had entered the temple in accordance with the agreement that close protection was needed, but when such a task was necessary, Lucinil seemed quite pleased.

"Anyway, don't forget the original purpose of protection."

"I'll take care of it on my own, you monster."

"Coming from a monster that comes out from a few shakes of a flask, that’s absurd."

"Um, that… that kind of talk really hurts, you know?"

"You're the one who called me a monster first."

"Right… Sorry…”

As Lucinil frowned, Gallarush folded his arms.

"I also went too far. I apologize."

Living too long, they had learned to apologize quickly when they grew tired of arguing with each other. As the atmosphere became awkward, Gallarush looked at Lucinil with a large toothy grin.

"Since you're providing close protection, you must be well aware of the current situation. Are there any special threats or problems? We're holding hands for now, but it's not like we don't know what the Black Order is scheming in the background…”

"Ah, right! Alsebringer!"

As if her sullen mood had vanished, Lucinil suddenly brightened and jumped up from her seat.

"Our Archdemon, you see! He was chosen by Alsebringer!"

She wore an expression like that of a mother whose child had just landed a job at a prestigious company.

—---

Naturally, panic ensued at the Council. Even Antirianus was flustered, after all.

Tiamata and Alsebringer.

Valier possessed two relics.

In particular, Eleris listened to the story with wide eyes.

Valier had told Eleris that Ludwig would be the owner of Alsebringer.

This meant that either the prediction was wrong, or the future had changed.

Or, perhaps.

Valier could be lying.

"That kid, you know. He'll do something big if he does anything. It's getting to the point where it'd be strange if he didn't."

Being chosen by two relics meant that the gods' will was in harmony with this. However, they were those who knew the truth about the gods and the demons. Humans believed that the gods chose for the sake of humans, but the reality was different.

If the will of the gods existed, then the will of that god had chosen Valier.

"Perhaps the gods are finally taking the side of the demons."

With a faint smile, Luruien said as such. Though she spoke the words, her smile showed no particular interest in either humans or demons.

The relics had long stood with humans, so perhaps now they were siding with the demons.

Gallarush crossed his bulky arms and muttered.

"I don't believe in the will of the gods. But possessing two sacred relics… it feels like there's some grand flow at play, and the Demon King must be the main actor in that flow."

Eleris stared at the table, unable to erase the sadness in her eyes.

"In the end, the object that killed the father ends up in the son's hands."

Antirianus spoke with a grin, as if he found it amusing.

"In a manner of speaking… it seems so?"

Lucinil's expression turned to one of surprise, as if she hadn't thought of that perspective at all.

"No wonder, his expression was rather stiff."

Lucinil recalled Reinhardt's face, which had turned rigid upon receiving the

Alsebringer.

She wondered why Reinhardt looked like that when he should be pleased, but upon thinking about it, Lucinil understood that the situation was one where he couldn't help but have such an expression.

Eleris continued to stare at the table with a stern expression.

'The Alsebringer… to him… '

Eleris silently watched the snowstorm blowing outside the window beyond the conference room.

She didn't know whether her foresight had been wrong or if she had been lied to from the beginning.

Valier was getting stronger.

Was he becoming stronger because he had to face trials that were approaching?

Or were trials arising simply because he was getting stronger?

Eleris couldn't tell.

—---

"Special activities, you say?"

Teacher Sarvina sighed as she looked at the special activities application submitted by Olivia.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Olivia, it's true that extracurricular activities are recognized for upperclassmen, but you've already taken a year off, haven't you? Your goal this year should be to graduate…"

"I don't have anything more to learn, really."

Olivia Lanze's words weren't wrong. She had given up on her major altogether,

changing it to swordsmanship for the sake of graduation. But for Olivia, who had incomparable divine power and swordsmanship skills compared to ordinary graduates, attending classes was nothing more than a waste of time.

Hence, she decided it would be better to gain experience through extracurricular activities that she couldn't obtain within the temple, and her words had a definite point rather than being arrogant.

"There may be cases where classes are recognized, but if it takes too long like last time, you may be forced to take another year off."

At Teacher Sarvina's words, Olivia smiled brightly.

"Then, that would be even better."

Teacher Sarvina couldn't understand her words but seemed unable to break Olivia's will.

However, upon seeing the destination and content written on the special activity application submitted by Olivia, Teacher Sarvina furrowed her brow.

"Well, it's not that dangerous of a place, and there's an investigation team from the Empire stationed there, so nothing major should happen… but why on earth do you want to go there?"

Olivia slightly lifted the corner of her mouth.

"I want to find traces of the Demon King."

Olivia's destination.

The Levaina capital, Rajeurn.

It was the place where the Demon King had attacked not long ago.

CHAPTER 392

After my major classes were replaced, I had been training to become accustomed to the power of the Alsebringer. Within the Royal Class, it was known that I was the master of the Alsebringer, so I could bring it out at the training ground anytime.

Of course, the Alsebringer was a sharp sword that could separate flesh and bone upon contact, so it was agreed to be used only in the high-level combat training grounds, not in regular training. In the first place, the opponents were supposed to use training swords, but with those, the sword itself could be shattered or sliced the moment it collided with the Alsebringer.

Although I was busy with training, I still attended general classes and had some free time.

I considered ways to make a name for myself on the continent as the master of the Alsebringer, but I hadn't found a suitable method yet. Charlotte was also living without any particular issues.

However, whenever she faced me, Charlotte's expression seemed like she was on the verge of tears.

I could feel her gratitude and immense guilt towards me.

"Why do you eat so well?"

As Lucinil and I walked down Main Street, I blankly stared at her munching on a crepe.

It was just the two of us. Lucinil had been whining for a walk so much that I brought her along on a whim.

I could understand her eating, since Eleris could eat too.

But why does she enjoy it so much?

"Don't you know that I'm a special being, Reinhardt?"

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm not an ordinary vampire, but a Homunculus. Naturally, my physical traits are different from humans and even from ordinary vampires."

"Could you speak a bit more quietly?"

"I'm doing real-time noise canceling, so it's fine. Anyway, I can manipulate my body with magic, didn't you know? That's how I easily passed through the Temple Gate. So, I can taste food too. It just doesn't become my life force."

Lucinil was indeed different from ordinary vampires in many ways. She was a Homunculus, a life form that wasn't supposed to exist in the first place, who had become a vampire.

In various ways, Lucinil, the Homunculus vampire, seemed to function more completely as a living being compared to other vampires.

"Anyway, do you have any qualms about obtaining the Alsebringer?"

"I'm of the belief that if I can use something, I should."

"Hmm. That's true. You did say you had no memory of it."

It seemed that Lucinil was worried about me having the weapon that killed the Demon King in my possession.

"Ugh, I still feel nauseous. I think I'm going to vomit."

After eating the crepe for a while, Lucinil suddenly dashed to the nearby public restroom.

Why does she do that when she seems to be enjoying eating?

The more I knew about Lucinil, the stranger she seemed.

A moment later, Lucinil came back to me, wiping her mouth with a pale expression.

"If you want to eat, eat properly. What are you doing?"

"I want to eat even if I know I'll vomit. I manage my expression well in front of the other kids, so don't worry unnecessarily."

It sounded like the excuse of an alcoholic.

"Anyway, I've informed the Council that you've been chosen by the Alsebringer. And it seems the dungeon reconstruction is going smoothly."

Summoning me outside wasn't pointless; it was to share the current state of affairs.

"Speaking of which, those magic research club kids seem a bit… odd."

"Odd, you say?"

"You know, that thing they made. That impossible thing."

The Power Cartridge and Moonshine.

It seemed Lucinil had learned about them.

"Two things I wouldn't even know where to start with, and they made them in just a few months? And from the research materials I saw, they don't appear to have any significant flaws?"

She thought it was absurd even though the kids were supposedly amazing at the Royal Class level. Seeing the actual results made Lucinil believe it was unbelievable.

These were items that even a Grand Archmage, a fitting title for someone who had studied magic for a long time like Lord Vampire, would be astonished by – and they were made by a high school club.

Of course, Adelia and Christina's talents were extraordinary, and in fact, our grade was exceptionally outstanding within the Royal Class.

Moonshine and Power Cartridge. Lucinil seemed to have a deep understanding that the Magic Research Club was not merely a gathering of kids discussing magic, although she didn't know how they came across the research materials.

"I understand why you want to keep it a secret… but it does feel like a waste."

We decided to hide the results so they wouldn't be discovered by Cantus Magna or cause trouble for the kids.

We haven't told the new club members to keep it a secret yet, but we felt a renewed need to ensure their discretion.

"And there's that girl. The adorable one."

"You're talking about Harriet, right?"

"Right. If we're talking about the impossible, she's the most bizarre. Reinterpreting scroll magic into rune magic? How is that even possible?"

It seemed that she had heard about Harriet's newly developed magic system while talking with the Magic Research Club kids.

"It makes me feel pathetic for what I've been doing with my life until now. I mean, these kids haven't even reached their twenties… Maybe I don't really have any talent? Like… I just pushed through with time… something like that?"

Lucinil started to express self-doubt. Anyway, she found the genius of the Magic Research Club kids astonishing, and among them, Harriet de Saint-Owan's talent was the most intriguing.

It was just selfishness to say she was protecting him while actually hanging around with him, getting pampered and wandering here and there.

"If I were Cantus Magna, I'd find those kids more enticing than some magic books."

"…I think so too."

"You don't seem to have any intention of using those kids to meet Cantus Magna."

"…"

Lucinil had been hiding the research results and was watching me live my life at the Temple in real time.

She had no choice but to know that I wouldn't try to use the kids.

"World peace, huh?"

Lucinil stretched as if she might tear apart, and said,

"Reinhardt, you know, those who dream such futile things tend to die by exile."

"Not everyone, though."

"Well, at least that's a positive point."

After stretching fully, Lucinil heaved a deep sigh and looked up at me.

Her gaze was somewhat serious, unlike her usual playful demeanor.

"Escaping before too many emotions build up might be a good idea."

Running away before getting closer to others.

Disappearing.

I could fully understand the meaning behind Lucinil's words, which suggested that it might be better that way.

Before too many emotions accumulate.

"But I think it's too late for that."

It would have been too late, even if we had tried a long time ago.

At my self-deprecating remark, Lucinil showed a wistful smile.

“…Yeah, it seems that way."

She added.

Lucinil, a first-year student, was now frequently seen in the second-year A-class dormitory.

"Where's my brother?"

"Ah… Your brother? Reinhardt? Maybe he's in the training hall…?"

"Ah, yes! Thank you, senior!"

Lucinil bowed to Heinrich and hurried off to the training hall.

For some reason, Reinhardt had won over a silver-haired first-year student as soon as the new school year started.

This junior named Lucinil called other seniors "senior" but followed Reinhardt around, calling him "my brother."

Moreover, Reinhardt didn't seem to mind it at all.

That's why everyone's hostility towards him was reignited.

But, of course, they couldn't express it physically.

He's the one chosen by Alsebringer, on whom the emperor's ban had been firmly imposed.

The attention of a cute junior, and even Alsebringer.

Why does he get to have everything?!

Everyone had reached the point of cursing the unfairness of the world.

Lucinil, who wandered around the second-year dormitory making a fuss.

"Ah, hello, senior."

"Uh, uh… Yeah, yeah."

Bertus, upon encountering Lucinil in the dormitory hallway, responded to her greeting with a nervous expression.

Silver hair.

That was like a form of PTSD for Bertus.

That's why Bertus, who always wore a mask and dealt with people skillfully, couldn't hide his discomfort whenever he encountered Lucinil.

Lucinil wasn't one to miss such signs.

"Do you hate me, senior?"

"What? No, I have no reason to."

"Then why can't you look me in the eye whenever you see me?"

"Ah… Did I do that? Hmm, I have no idea."

Unable to tell her about his silver hair allergy, Bertus licked his lips while looking at Lucinil's innocent gaze.

Bertus had been preoccupied with many things lately, so he couldn't focus on his duties at the temple. He spent many days at the Winter Palace and was unaware of the events happening in the dormitory.

It was common knowledge that Reinhardt was under immense stress due to recent events involving Charlotte.

A freshman underclassman.

A silver-haired girl.

She constantly sought out Reinhardt.

Although Bertus didn't know the details, it was clear that Reinhardt had already won the heart of the first-year student. At least, that's how it appeared to Bertus.

Reinhardt, who, with the start of the semester, made the silver-haired girl cling to him as if her life depended on it.

But why?

For what purpose?

Bertus's mind became tangled with confusion.

The apostle of Tu’an.

Chosen by Alsebringer as a hero.

Soon to be engaged to Charlotte, the royal family's prospective son-in-law.

Winner of the cross-dressing contest.

Silver hair fetishist.

Reinhardt.

Unconsciously, Bertus grabbed the shoulder of the bewildered silver-haired junior.

"Be careful with Reinhardt."

"Huh? Um… Yes?"

"Just be careful if I say be careful!"

Bertus fiercely glared at Lucinil, who suddenly lost her spirit, as he said those words.

"Um, uh… I will…”

Confused, Lucinil hastily nodded her head.

—---

At the present moment, the most important task was to lure Cantus Magna into the dungeon created in collaboration with the Black Order in Darkland.

And on a personal level, it was about how to proceed with the engagement to Charlotte, and how to explain it to the others. It was predicted that things would work out once the emperor contacted him, but he hadn't been contacted by the emperor yet.

The magic research club's research was sealed after achieving results, but that didn't mean the club was disbanded. Everyone seemed to be brainstorming ideas for new,

but not too dangerous, research projects.

Even if that wasn't the case, Louis Ancton seemed to be sharing the results of magic research with his fellow students in his own way, helping them improve their skills.

Ellen and I were receiving training in combat from Saviolin Turner, which went beyond mere swordsmanship lessons.

Thus.

Though it was like walking on thin ice that could break at any moment, he was spending a rather uneventful first semester.

Of course, it wasn't exactly the same as during his first year.

Usually, on weekends, he would spend his time in the training hall, practicing with Ellen, or checking on the progress of the research at the magic research club.

But as he became a second-year student and various circumstances changed, his lives had also changed slightly.

Turner had mostly set aside her duties as the head of the Shanafel, devoting her time to training the two of them, but she couldn't completely abandon her responsibilities.

On weekends, she seemed to return to the royal palace to attend to Shanafel's affairs. She was already pressed for time, but her life seemed even more hectic.

One would think that even a grandmaster like her might collapse from exhaustion.

So they received Saviolin Turner's guidance only on weekdays and trained separately on weekends.

The high-level combat training ground was quite far from the dormitory, so Ellen and I immersed ourselves in the relentless clashing of swords, just the two of us.

The intensity of the battle was more fierce and brutal than anything we had experienced in the practice arena so far.

Ellen wielded Lament, while I alternated between using Alsebringer and Tiamata. I

could have used Lapelt as well, but it was impossible to do so.

Before Ellen's sword could even touch me, the wave of flame emitted from Lapelt would send me flying in a pathetic heap.

It was also impossible to break through the power of Lapelt, which was practically an automatic interception system.

Thus, Ellen wielded Lament alone, and I repeatedly clashed swords with her throughout the day, using the two sacred weapons in turn.

-Clang! Crash!

If the Ellen from last year had faced off against my current self, I would have undoubtedly been the victor.

But now, a year later, I still stood no match against Ellen.

Just as I had grown incomparably stronger compared to my past self, Ellen had also become much more powerful than the person she was a year ago.

-Clang!

Taking advantage of the force Ellen thrust upon me, I grabbed her sleeve and flipped her over as if applying a joint lock, crushing her down, only for her to aim her sword at my throat.

"You're dead."

“…It doesn't matter anyway, since we'll just be summoned back."

“…Right."

Here, we could attack each other with full force and even cut or stab without any consequences. However, throughout the year of relentlessly facing off against each other, Ellen had developed a habit of merely restraining me and stopping short of dealing a fatal blow. She would halt right before her finishing strike could land on me, her reflexes ingrained.

Ellen's sweat-drenched hair and her slightly ragged breaths hovered close to me, as

we found ourselves in close proximity.

This closeness between us no longer felt awkward.

As Ellen pinned me down, she gazed down at me and muttered absentmindedly.

"Sweaty smell."

“…Do you think you don't smell sweaty?"

"…”

At my words, Ellen stared blankly at me for a moment, then suddenly stood up.

"I'll go wash up."

No.

No!

I was just saying it!

You didn't smell sweaty!

I instantly regretted my habit of immediately responding with a retort whenever I heard something.

CHAPTER 393

The high-level combat training ground we used was an enormous facility, but it wasn't a place that granted access to just anyone.

Within the area we had chosen to use, only the two of us had clearance due to secrecy and security measures. Of course, the facility was equipped with amenities such as showers.

Once we came here, we'd be so exhausted, as if we had gone on a scouting mission, so we'd shower before leaving. That's why we always brought extra clothes, not just one set, but several.

Having arrived early after breakfast, it was only around noon.

It was time to eat lunch, but since we'd be training after eating, we planned to spend the whole day here, engaged in combat training.

However.

"Let's call it a day."

I had finished showering first and returned to the waiting room when Ellen came back and said that.

She didn't seem upset. Her lips weren't protruding, after all.

Would she really not train tomorrow if she insisted on not training today?

Unknowingly, my words seemed to have made Ellen think of something she had never considered before.

It was as if, for the first time in a year, she thought that she too might be smelling my sweat, just as I had been smelling hers in our countless clashes.

She might have thought that since I never said anything, it didn't bother me. But in reality, I might have been sick of smelling it all this time, and that's what she seemed

to be thinking.

Ellen stared at her white toes in silence, wearing her slippers, not saying a word about what was on her mind.

"No… Hey…"

"…"

"I just meant… like the smell of sweat…"

"Don't…"

Ellen's voice was trembling.

"Ah, don't say anything… Just don't say anything…"

Her head hung low, and Ellen's cheeks were flushed a bright red.

With one careless slip of the tongue, I had shattered Ellen's mental state.

I had forgotten, but in the end, Ellen was only eighteen years old.

At that age, she would be sensitive to such things…

Ellen's composure had been broken by a single mention of the smell of sweat.

What's worse, Ellen couldn't even blame me because she had brought it up first.

Somehow.

We didn't fight for any other reason, but would we really not be able to practice swordsmanship together from now on just because of the smell of sweat?

I really didn't mind, you know? It wasn't a situation where I could care about such things.

But in this situation, anything I said would be disastrous.

Me - I'm sorry for saying that.

Ellen - So you're saying it did smell?

Apologizing would lead to a bad conclusion.

Me - I said it didn't smell, okay?

Ellen - Then why did you say that earlier? It must have smelled after all. You're only saying that because you're sorry. So it did smell, right?

A very high possibility of the same outcome.

Me - Yes, there was a smell of sweat. But isn't it natural for sweat to smell when you're sweating?

Without even considering her response, I realized that this was the worst thing to say.

In the end, the situation was such that it would inevitably shock Ellen's mental state, no matter what was said.

And so, I sat there, unable to do anything, while Ellen seemed on the verge of humiliation, her head bowed.

Oh, our calm and collected Ellen.

In the past, she would have said something like, "When this kind of thing happens, I'd be sweating, and it would smell of sweat."

But she had become a young lady.

And now, she fidgeted with her toes, not knowing what to do.

How adorable.

As cute as it was, I couldn't leave her like this, her mental state turning to dust.

And as I thought that, a sense of guilt surged up like a backlash.

I had to tell her.

Now, I had to tell her.

But my lips wouldn't part.

"Reinhardt."

Ellen called me, fiddling with her toes.

"Uh… Yeah."

"Lately, you've been acting strange."

It seemed that Ellen wanted to stop at that, perhaps because she sensed something. She carefully turned her head towards me.

"Is something wrong?"

There was no way Ellen wouldn't notice my trembling sword tip.

So she must have been holding back until now, asking me finally.

I had to tell her.

"…"

But in the end, I couldn't say anything.

I didn't know how to broach the subject.

Ellen stared at me silently, then approached and gently embraced my neck. The scent of her hair and nape tickled my nostrils.

"It's natural to be anxious."

Perhaps she thought that I was tense because the showdown with the Demon King was approaching, and the intensity of our training was increasing.

With my neck embraced by Ellen, she whispered into my ear.

"It'll be alright."

Everything will be fine.

No matter what, everything.

It'll all work out, she whispered incessantly into my ear.

The more Ellen did so, the more the lump of guilt in my heart grew exponentially.

If I kept listening to Ellen's tiny whispers, I felt as if I would lose my sanity.

So, I gently grasped Ellen's arm, which was embracing me, and released it.

"Hey."

“…Yeah?"

"Let's just have some fun."

"…?"

Yes.

I'm exhausted.

"We've been running ourselves ragged lately. If we're going to take a break, let's just go out and have some fun."

Let's take a little break.

We've been running so hard, without even a moment's rest, that our minds are cluttered, and the things we need to say keep getting pushed back.

Let's cool our heads a bit.

And then, let's talk.

Upon hearing that, Ellen glanced down, then gave a slight nod.

“…Okay."

Somehow, her tone sounded a bit lighter.

—---

We could go to Temple Main Street, but today is Saturday.

Therefore, tomorrow is Sunday, and there's plenty of time to play.

"Let's invite the others too."

Ellen suggested that it would be nice to have the others join us if we were going to have fun. It was unexpected, as I thought she would want it to be just the two of us.

I did plan on having an important conversation.

There was no particular need for the two of them to go out and have fun. After all, the story would become known to everyone eventually.

Adelia was at the Magic Research Society, and it seemed that Liana and Cliffman were busy with physical training.

Liana, who used to drop everything and rush to have fun, refused to play on the weekends, and Ellen and I couldn't help but find it somewhat regrettable.

"Going out to have fun?"

"Yeah."

"Where to?"

"I don't know yet."

Harriet, who had been considering going to the Royal Magic Department, seemed slightly hesitant but decided to join us.

Harriet, Ellen, and myself.

The three of us ended up leaving the temple together.

In the original work, Ellen was a nerd who only wielded a sword in the training

grounds, and not much has changed even now.

Harriet was a nerd in the original work as well, albeit a rude one. Now, she is still a nerd but somewhat cute.

And then, I couldn't help but lose my composure as I realized another fact.

“…What are you thinking about?"

Ellen tilted her head when she noticed my strange expression.

"I just realized something quite surprising."

"Yeah?"

"Maybe I'm actually an incredible nerd?"

"…?"

"Wow."

Very shocking and surprising…

If I think about it, I am a nerd.

I get up early every morning to train, and if there are no special plans on weekends, I am devoted to honing my major in swordsmanship, locked in the training grounds with Ellen.

Although most of the things I do are considered ruffian-like, in reality, I am quite an outstanding nerd among nerds. Even considering not only my studies but also my achievements in my major, it would be appropriate to call me the second-ranking student in the second year of the temple, right after Ellen.

At my sudden nerd appeal, Ellen and Harriet looked at me with slightly open mouths.

“…Well, you're not wrong."

"Right. I don't want to admit it, but it's true…”

Upon further reflection, they both seemed even more shocked because it wasn't a wrong statement.

Reinhardt is an exemplary student.

A ruffian exemplary student.

Anyway, Ellen is a nerd, Harriet is a nerd, and I am a nerd.

So, none of us have ever really had fun before, and now that we're supposed to, we have no idea what to do.

We did leave the temple without a plan.

We have no idea where to go. We agreed to have fun, but what should we do to enjoy ourselves?

The only thing that comes to mind when I think about what to do with these two is eating. Of course, it would mainly revolve around Ellen.

"I want to go to the sea."

Ellen said something that neither Harriet nor I had anticipated.

The sea.

"The sea? Isn't it incredibly far?"

There is no beach near the Gladius Empire.

"What's the big deal? We can go."

"How? If it's by gate, there's a queue…"

"I am a great person, and I have this."

Harriet widened her eyes when she saw the royal crest I brought.

"How did you… Oh… I see…"

She seemed to realize that I was the owner of the Alsebringer and understood the circumstances under which I obtained it.

And then, her gaze naturally shifted.

"What about Ellen?"

"Yes."

Ellen pulled out the royal crest from her bosom and showed it to Harriet. Harriet stared blankly at the two royal crests before her eyes.

"Wow… So now I'm supposed to…"

"Technically, I'm of higher status than you. How does it feel, Your Highness? How does it feel to be in the presence of someone with a status equivalent to royalty?"

"Y-you! You shouldn't say such things! You scoundrel!"

Smack!

"Hey! How dare you touch someone with a status equivalent to royalty? Huh? Do you want to be arrested for blasphemy?"

"W-wow… Really. This piece of trash… This trash…"

Harriet's face turned red, trembling with anger as she saw how easily the noble status was used against her.

Anyway, we can go anywhere there's a warp gate.

It's still a bit too cold to go into the ocean. Once Harriet calmed down from her shock and horror, I looked at Ellen.

"Do you just want to see the ocean or do you want to go to a beach where swimming is possible?"

"It would be nice if we could swim."

Then we should go to a tropical region. It's not impossible. Since it's Saturday, it

won't matter if we go and stay for a day.

Warp gate system.

In this aspect alone, it's much better than where I used to live.

A beach where swimming is possible.

As I thought, a place came to mind.

"Hey, how about we go somewhere near where we did the uninhabited island mission before?"

"Yeah, yeah."

"Wow! That's right?!"

Seeing Ellen and Harriet's excited expressions, they both seemed to agree strongly.

"It must have been Kamsencha Archipelago."

"That's right. I think so."

Harriet and I had completely forgotten, but Ellen remembered the place name accurately.

—---

Imperial territory, Kamsencha Archipelago.

It was the location of the uninhabited island group mission, but we didn't know much about the specific location of Kamsencha Archipelago since we had been teleported there by a mage after going through the warp gates.

Ellen and I flashed the royal crest as we passed through the warp gates.

Seeing the instant free pass granted by the royal crest, Harriet seemed impressed.

"No security checks at all."

"Of course."

When using the warp gate, one is supposed to describe the destination, verify their identity, and state the purpose of travel, but none of that happened. Not just for Ellen and me, but for Harriet as well.

As we went through the large warp gates, only the warp gate leading to Kamsencha Island was left. The guards froze upon seeing the royal crest.

"You wish to go to Kamsencha Island? Yes! We will connect you right away!"

It seemed as if it was their first time seeing someone with a royal crest in a provincial city, as the guards were visibly flustered.

And so, we were able to travel to Kamsencha Island in the Kamsencha Archipelago almost in one breath.

As soon as we arrived on Kamsencha Island, the sweltering air and humid weather instantly brought back memories of last year's uninhabited island mission.

The gate we had just passed through was hot, but this place was the real deal.

“…Is it just me, or do I slightly regret coming here as soon as we arrived?"

“…Me too."

"…”

It was only natural.

In humid areas, sweating was inevitable. Harriet began fanning herself with a hand fan as soon as we arrived.

Ellen glanced at her own neck with a puzzled expression and then looked at me.

"Let's go back."

Seriously?

I'd rather die.

"I've never once thought that you smelled of sweat. Even if you did, I would've thought it was okay, but I've never thought it was bad."

"…?"

“…Sweat smell? What are you talking about?"

Unable to hold back, my blunt words left Ellen with a slightly puzzled expression.

Harriet seemed to have no idea what I was talking about.

No…

Even though I said this because I was worried about her mental state…

That was such a perverted remark, right?

Ellen pondered for a moment and then cocked her head.

“…Do you like the smell of my sweat? Why?"

How could anyone like such a smell? Why do you like it?

Do you like me so much that you even like the smell of my sweat?

Although she probably didn't mean it that way, when she looked at me with that expression, it made me think that way!

We spend the whole day together, and you even want to attend classes together? It feels similar to that time!

"Please, let's stop saying things that sound crazy to each other."

“…Why crazy?"

"Ah, this kind of thing is driving me nuts. Stop it."

"Okay."

"Sweat smell…? Do you like that kind of thing?"

Harriet asked with a slightly disgusted tone.

"No! That's not what I meant!"

"Then what is it?"

As I tried to explain to Harriet, Ellen grabbed my sleeve and shook her head violently.

It felt like she would kill me if I said anything.

"Let's just go."

However, we didn't know much about Kamsencha Island. The uninhabited island we had been on for our mission was one of the countless islands scattered near Kamsencha Island, and we had no idea where it was.

On the other hand, Kamsencha Island was, of course, inhabited, and though it was not as large as a major city, there were ordinary people and shops everywhere.

The weather was still chilly in the early spring of the Empire, and we had never considered that we would arrive on Kamsencha Island, thousands of kilometers away from the Empire's mainland, before leaving the temple.

So, we were dressed in everyday clothes and cloaks, which did not match the tropical climate at all.

"Should we use magic?"

Harriet could have cast a spell similar to the chilling touch spell that Eleris had cast on us in Darkland last time.

"Oh, dear, you must have come from a cold place. You'll be cooked alive if you walk around dressed like that. Why don't you buy some clothes?"

Even the street vendors were telling us to buy new clothes.

"Magic is fine, but let's buy clothes in the first place."

"Okay."

The humid weather made it feel as if we were trapped in a steamer, so we naturally found ourselves heading to a clothing store.

—---

Ellen donned a white, airy dress, a round straw hat, and lightweight sandals.

Harriet wore an oversized t-shirt with short shorts and slippers, giving off a somewhat bottomless fashion vibe.

I opted for slippers, shorts, and a shirt resembling an aloha shirt.

Since we might go swimming, it was a good idea to buy swimsuits as well.

"Much better."

"Definitely."

"I can cast magic if needed."

Our little outing in front of the house had turned into a full-fledged trip, but anywhere the warp gate took us was practically our front yard anyway.

Ellen's arms and legs, clad in a white dress and straw hat, were so pale and slender that they seemed to reflect light, appearing dazzling. Harriet, with her hair down, looked refreshingly different.

The beach soon appeared, and Ellen enjoyed a coconut from a street vendor. Perhaps it brought back memories.

“…It's bitter."

"Really? I thought it tasted good…”

Harriet also took a sip of Ellen's coconut and made a similarly sour face.

"Yeah… it's bitter."

Seeing the two of them bicker over a coconut was quite entertaining. Ellen continued to carry the coconut, not one to waste food.

As I gazed at them quietly, they both turned and addressed me.

"What are you doing?"

"Come on, the sun is strong."

"Ah, yeah. Right."

Having changed into more suitable clothes for the weather, it was time to get moving in earnest.

"I'm hungry."

"Me too."

Having skipped lunch after our morning training, we were genuinely hungry. Harriet seemed to have missed lunch as well. From the way they both pursed their lips in thought, they seemed to crave something specific.

I wanted to go to the sea.

Then, I remembered the group mission on the deserted island, which brought us to Kamsencha Archipelago.

There could only be one thing these two might want to eat right now.

"Want some lobster?"

"Uh-huh."

"Yes!"

Both of them strongly affirmed my suggestion.

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Although they didn't know much about the Kamsencha region, it was clear that the area's specialty was seafood.

"I've noticed this before, but why are they so big?"

Harriet's eyes widened as she looked at the enormous lobster that had been cooked and served.

"The bigger, the better."

“…I doubt you'd ever complain about something being too big if it's food."

"Whatever."

"Just saying."

Most of the restaurants sold seafood dishes, and the prices were much lower compared to the Imperial City. They began to eat a lobster butter dish that was five times the size of a typical lobster, poking at it with their forks.

"Ah! It's been so long since I've had this, and it tastes just like I remember!"

Harriet shook with delight, a happy smile on her face. Her reactions were always so rich. As he recalled, Harriet had trouble eating many things, but lobster was something she could manage.

His relationship with Harriet had improved slightly after he had given Harriet some of his portions when she was still hungry.

-Om nom nom

Ellen was eating vigorously, as if she had no time to spare for conversation.

Thinking about it, the waters near the uninhabited island were teeming with seafood, including lobsters and octopuses. The Kamsencha region must have been

thriving by distributing these abundant marine resources through the warp gates.

The area seemed to have decent tourism resources as well, but perhaps the uninhabited island they had visited was particularly special.

He had skipped lunch, so he was eating too, but it was always fascinating to watch Ellen devour the giant lobster. Harriet, on the other hand, was eating elegantly with her fork, as befitting a noble young lady. Ellen tended to eat quickly.

Ellen was wearing a white dress.

She was eating non-stop, but Ellen was careful not to let any food splash on her dress.

Ellen's dress remained spotless even after she had finished an entire lobster.

"I don't know if eating without getting dirty can be considered a talent, but you certainly have it."

"…"

"I mean, you eat so cleanly; why are you offended?"

Isn't this a compliment?

It's not like he said it was amazing that she could eat so much without getting dirty!

"I used to get scolded a lot."

"…Oh, really?"

"I was told not to get dirty while eating since they wouldn't scold me for eating a lot. My dad said that."

"I can't imagine Ellen getting scolded…"

Ellen's father.

Could it be that he had choked back tears while telling his daughter, who ate enough to bankrupt the family, to at least not get dirty while eating?

"So, eating without getting dirty isn't a talent; it's the fruit of your efforts?"

"Yes."

No wonder she could eat so much and not look unpleasant; it was the result of her efforts.

In a way, it was quite adorable.

Hearing about Ellen being scolded for eating something messy was a novelty to me. Come to think of it, it was around this time last year that Ellen had been gnawing on jerky alone at dawn, which marked the beginning of us sharing food.

Although we hadn't been on a mission to Kamsencha Island, being here brought back memories from last year. It seemed the same for Ellen and Harriet.

"I was really scared when it suddenly started raining back then."

Harriet shivered as if recalling that moment.

I knew it was going to rain, but knowing and actually experiencing the downpour were two different things. I had brought shivering Harriet to my makeshift shelter at the time.

Harriet's eyes seemed to grow distant, as if she was reminiscing about the past.

"Well, if you want, we could find a deserted island and try to survive there again until Sunday."

"When did I say I wanted to do it again?!"

Harriet snapped, as if to say that the memory was enough and she didn't want to go through it again.

"Even if we did it again, it would be quite different from before."

Ellen said so.

Harriet, who had once concentrated hard to create a single fireball, now possessed magical abilities that allowed her to cast spells almost instantly.

Ellen had been energetic back then, but now she was capable of Magic Body Strengthening.

The clumsy orcs we had faced back then could now be easily defeated by Lament and the others even if dozens charged at once.

Hunting, gathering, and enduring would surely be easier now than before.

"Right, it won't be as difficult as it used to be."

Harriet nodded in agreement. If we faced the same hardships now, we would be able to overcome them as if they were nothing.

Things had become much easier.

That's why it wouldn't be as tough as before, but we also knew that the sense of accomplishment would be diminished.

Harriet's expression didn't look particularly happy.

—---

Kamsencha was a resort, so there were quite a few people coming and going.

On the white sandy beach, where the emerald-like blue sea spread under the clear blue sky, there were quite a few tourists.

Thankfully, the beach wasn't so crowded that it was half water, half people. There were people lying on sunbeds under parasols, and bungalows were set up along the shore.

Ellen stared at the beach for a moment and then reached for the hem of her dress.

-Whish!

"Eh, Ellen!"

"What are you… Oh, you're wearing it."

"Yes."

Ellen had already changed into a bikini beneath her dress. Harriet was startled by Ellen suddenly undressing but then sighed with relief upon seeing the blue swimsuit.

"I'll… go change into my swimsuit too."

Harriet went to the changing room set up on the beach, and I also changed into my swimsuit and came out.

The early spring sun shone brightly, quite different from the chilly equator.

The weather and scenery were absolutely fantastic.

But today, I had something to say.

Therefore, no matter what I saw, I couldn't feel particularly good.

—---

We went swimming.

Our way of enjoying swimming was a little different from others. Harriet cast underwater breathing spells on all three of us, allowing us to venture far out into the ocean as if we were scuba diving.

So, it didn't really matter to us how many people were on the beach. After all, we went far out to sea, almost not even coming out of the water as if we were conducting underwater exploration.

We had entered the ocean to hunt during our mission, but now we were swimming purely for enjoyment.

There were some happenings.

For instance, a sudden appearance of a shark startled Ellen, who summoned Lament to intercept it.

Or Harriet, who suddenly got caught in a downward current and plunged into the sea, managed to force herself back up by conjuring a magical torrent.

Thinking about it, there were quite a few dangerous moments, but everyone had

their abilities, so there were no major issues.

One way or another, we spent the day exploring the ocean depths, taking breaks, and then going back into the water.

Nighttime came.

We had dinner at a nearby restaurant. Harriet seemed exhausted, barely eating before collapsing onto the table.

Ellen and I, on the other hand, had been less active than usual, so we had energy to spare.

"What shall we do now? If we're going to sleep here, we need to find a place to stay."

There's no need to go back immediately since tomorrow is Sunday.

"I can't go anywhere… I don't want to sleep in a strange place… I can't go anywhere…"

Looking at Harriet, who was mumbling while lying down like a jellyfish, it seemed her exhaustion had gone beyond her limits.

"Alright, let's find a place to rest."

"Thank you…"

Ellen gently stroked Harriet's head.

—---

We quickly found a place to rest. Instead of staying in an inn, we rented a bungalow on the sea. We had enough money, and the area was well-equipped for tourists, so we found a pretty decent place. Each bedroom was separate, so there were no awkward situations.

The rather large bungalow even had a small swimming pool.

However, having spent the entire day in the water and with it being nighttime, we were more inclined to shower and change clothes than to swim. We sat down,

looking out at the sea.

"I never imagined we'd be in a place like this when I woke up this morning."

"Me neither."

Although the warp gate made long-distance travel possible, it wasn't often that we actually moved this far. Harriet suddenly smiled as if she remembered something, looking at Ellen and me.

"Ha, if Liana was here, she would've suggested having a drink…"

Harriet's words trailed off.

Indeed.

In a place like this, it would have been natural for Liana to suggest drinking when night fell. However, Liana had become too busy to entertain the idea of going out, and even if she had come along, she likely wouldn't have mentioned drinking.

A changed situation, changed people, and changed behaviors.

The three of us sat together on the terrace, staring blankly into space.

"It's only been a year, but so much has changed," Harriet murmured, her head bowed and her voice tinged with melancholy.

Once arrogant, the princess Harriet had grown kinder, but she had also come to know sadness.

Ellen had vowed not to live like her brother, but now, she understood him to some extent.

After her father's death, Liana broke free from her indolent life.

Many people had changed.

And, of course, I was no exception. Due to possessing the sacred artifact, I was forced to become a hero. The same was true for Ellen.

These changes had both positive and negative aspects.

But in one way or another, everyone had become stronger than before. And because we all felt the threat of the Demon King in our bones, we were all somewhat desperate.

"It wouldn't have been so bad if everything had stayed the same," Harriet mused absentmindedly.

Liana would still be lazy, I would still be a bad-tempered guy, and Ellen would simply be indifferent and enjoy eating.

Without the need to become stronger, without the compulsion to do so.

It would have been nice if those days could have just continued. Harriet spoke these words in the tranquil and serene atmosphere of the resort bungalow.

Ellen silently embraced Harriet's shoulders.

"We can do this. Whatever it is."

Everything will be alright.

Everything will turn out fine.

Like comforting a child, Ellen whispered softly to Harriet. Harriet placed her hand on Ellen's arm and nodded her head.

To Ellen, who believed that everything would be alright. To Harriet.

I had to tell them now.

I couldn't put it off any longer.

-Cicadas chirping

The sound of insects came from the coastal side.

Just as the Castle of Epiaux was eternally winter, this place would be eternally summer.

The hot sun would relentlessly beat down on the sea and the coast, and the same scenery would always be spread before us.

I had neither eternal winter nor eternal summer.

I didn't know what to call the seasons I had experienced since arriving at the temple.

"I have… something I need to tell you both…"

From now on, I would have to live in a changed season.

—---

The explanation was lengthy.

But as I mentioned the essential words, I couldn't help but see their expressions harden.

The sudden mention of an engagement.

Naturally, Harriet and Ellen had no idea what I was talking about. An engagement out of nowhere.

I explained everything from beginning to end. Even though the explanation only served to make our moods increasingly strange and uncomfortable, it had to be done.

I couldn't explain everything, but I could give them a rough idea of what had happened.

The events that transpired after returning from the Demon King's castle, when Charlotte was experiencing something akin to aftereffects.

The day I risked my life to save Charlotte.

And Charlotte, who was overwhelmed by only caring for her own health, eventually fell behind in the competition for the throne. Now, even her own faction was turning their backs on her.

The fact that it wasn't Bertus who posed the problem, but the risk of losing one's life

due to traitors within.

So, in order to protect Charlotte, I needed a justification, and as the master of Alsebringer, I had to become engaged to her to prevent the loss of her supporting faction.

No one asked why I went so far for Charlotte.

I didn't say I had no choice but to make this decision in order to save her life.

I wanted to protect Charlotte because I loved her, and that's why I wanted to marry her. Both would have to accept it that way, and I didn't bother denying it.

They would naturally accept it that way.

I made a choice.

Trying to hold onto something else clumsily was simply absurd.

“…Ah."

Harriet stared at me blankly, her face drained of color.

Plunk

A single tear fell from Ellen's expressionless face.

I didn't apologize. It would be even stranger if I did.

Apologizing would only make the situation more bizarre, and everyone would feel even more terrible than they do now.

I said so, and stared silently at the sea.

The gentle waves rolled ceaselessly towards the shore.

Ellen bowed her head without a word.

Seeing Ellen like this, Harriet looked at me and forced a strange expression.

It was an indescribable, somewhat odd expression.

"Right, right… You… Ha… Well… You've succeeded… How… How did someone like you… How…"

In the end, Harriet's face contorted miserably as she tried to say something.

"How… on earth… Why…"

I couldn't bear to look directly at the weeping Harriet.

As Ellen silently bowed her head.

"Was it a lie?"

She asked very quietly.

She didn't say what it was about.

But I knew which moment she was referring to.

The day I handed her Lapelt.

When I refused it.

And what I said after that.

She must be talking about that day.

I knew what I had to answer.

"…Yes."

Ellen didn't ask anything else.

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No more words were exchanged.

Both Ellen and Harriet silently went to their respective bedrooms to sleep, while I sat on the terrace, staring blankly at the crashing waves on the coast.

I had made this choice to prevent losing Charlotte.

But in doing so, I lost something else. I couldn't precisely describe what it was, but I had lost something and would continue to lose more.

This was not the end.

I had to become a hero.

Only when the world knows that I am the master of Alsebringer, and I gain public fame, will there be political ground for a princess engaged to such a hero.

The integration of the hero into the royal family.

I didn't know exactly what Bertus wanted, who desired this and tried to reignite a battle that had already ended. Whether it was truly for fun, or if there were other hidden intentions.

Nevertheless, I had to become a hero.

Not only should it be known that I am the master of Alsebringer, but I also had to do something.

I had to do countless dangerous tasks that were undoubtedly risky.

Aah…

On the beautiful beach where the sound of the waves and insects mixed, I spent the night unable to sleep.

—---

If it had been a year earlier, the engagement of Reinhardt, a beggar, and Princess Charlotte de Gardias would have been a laughable matter.

But now, it had become an unfunny affair for different reasons.

A princess losing her political footing.

The master of Alsebringer, which had become the most potent symbol among the relics after the Great Demon War.

In a way, the successor of Ragan Artorius.

The engagement had now become an absurd matter, with the logic of why the descendant of the hero should marry a hollow princess.

The trio who had left for Kamsencha Archipelago returned the next day. There was hardly any conversation. Ellen remained silent, Reinhardt couldn't speak, and Harriet wanted to say something but stayed quiet, knowing that no words could provide a solution.

They were not in a state fit for training.

Reinhardt locked himself in his room, while Ellen wandered around the dormitory blankly.

Ellen encountered Princess Charlotte de Gardias, who had returned to the temple from the palace, in the central lobby on the second floor.

Naturally, Ellen and Charlotte's eyes met.

"Uh, ah… hello?"

Although they were in different classes, they had encountered each other often, and it was not a completely unknown relationship, so Charlotte could greet Ellen.

It could happen.

But even as she greeted her, her fingertips trembled slightly.

Her eyes wavered.

It sent a signal to Ellen.

Charlotte seemed to feel guilty just by facing herself. Had it been like that a few times when they encountered each other recently?

Ellen couldn't remember it well.

However, she knew what that behavior of Charlotte meant now.

Reinhardt's strange state these days, the shaking sword tips, and the anxious appearance - all of it.

It wasn't because of the Demon King, but because of this problem. She didn't know how to explain it to herself.

Now she knew.

When Ellen approached, Charlotte awkwardly brushed past her without returning the greeting. Seeing Ellen come closer, Charlotte retreated a half-step, seemingly frightened.

Though Ellen was ultimately a commoner, she was the wielder of the sacred artifact, Lament, and the younger sister of Ragan Artorius.

Since she entered the temple, even without knowing her status, Ellen was someone who never fell behind anyone based on her position alone.

But Ellen had never tried to exploit that fact, not even once.

That's why Ellen had never been intimidated by anyone.

Ellen stared straight into the princess's eyes.

"Tell me one thing."

"Uh? Uh… Uh… Yes."

Biting her lip slightly, Charlotte looked at Ellen, who asked her question.

"Do you… like Reinhardt?"

"…"

Charlotte's eyes trembled, as if she hadn't expected such a direct question. Embarrassed, she could have run away while scolding Ellen for asking.

But Ellen's expression seemed as if she would grab Charlotte by the collar if she fled.

Charlotte probably intuited what Ellen knew.

The engagement.

Knowing about that issue, feeling frustrated and sad, but unable to change Reinhardt's heart, Ellen could only ask Charlotte that much.

As Charlotte looked into Ellen's eyes,

"Yes."

She spoke sincerely, amidst a wretched feeling.

"A lot… very… very much."

Ellen could clearly sense it in Charlotte's gaze. At the very least, Reinhardt wasn't being used by Charlotte. If Charlotte was merely using Reinhardt to survive, Ellen wouldn't know what she'd do.

But Charlotte was genuine. She didn't know when it started, but Charlotte had high expectations for Reinhardt, and even in this situation, she wasn't happy but felt sorry for him.

The last glimmer of hope she had clung to.

Now shattered.

Ellen mumbled blankly,

"I…"

Her words trailed off.

I was first.

I loved him more.

I spent much more time.

"…"

Ellen couldn't bring herself to finish those words, as they only made her feel more miserable.

In front of the distorted expression of guilt on Charlotte de Gardias' face,

I loved him before you did. When everyone thought Reinhardt was nothing but a lowborn, I was with him. We spent irreplaceable, precious time together.

Because Reinhardt had to choose you to save your life in this dangerous situation, isn't this too unfair?

Ellen couldn't bring herself to say those words.

"I'm sorry…"

In front of Charlotte's fragile expression, Ellen averted her gaze.

"…"

It was painful to see Charlotte, who had everything she wanted, unable to find happiness.

In the dormitory, Ellen, of course, and Harriet would pass by me without a word when they saw me.

Harriet seemed unsure of what to say, while Ellen would pass by with her head down.

It seemed less like they disliked me and more like there was a slightly different issue.

It felt like they were avoiding me now because they didn't know how to handle the situation.

Ironically, Charlotte seemed to be having as much trouble dealing with me as Ellen and Harriet. When she saw me, she would hesitate as if she didn't know what to say, and ultimately say nothing at all.

Would she find expressions of gratitude or apologies strange?

Regardless, Ellen and I were scheduled to take our major classes together.

It felt strangely similar to the first time I encountered Ellen in my freshman year.

There she was, Ellen Artorious with her cold expression, trying not to feel anything for me, devoid of emotion.

Her swordsmanship was not emotional, but rather restrained.

The dry lessons continued, with her overpowering me in the most accurate timing and manner possible.

Ellen didn't share a single word of personal conversation with me. Thus, the lessons went on all day long.

"That's enough for today. Go back and rest."

After the lesson, Saviolin Turner said that. Ellen left without a word.

"Reinhardt, stay for a moment."

"Yes."

I had a feeling I knew why she called me. In the high-ranking combat training room waiting area, where only I remained after Ellen left, she sat next to me with her arms crossed.

"I heard you're engaged to Her Highness the Princess."

"Yes."

"…"

She had a complicated expression on her face as she looked at the waiting room exit, lost in thought.

"His Majesty has pondered over various aspects of this issue, like whether to publicly announce your existence."

While my existence being made public would secure Charlotte's safety, it could also put me in danger. That's why the Emperor approached this issue cautiously.

"The royal family will not take any position on this. However, rumors will spread among the nobility."

"I see."

"Yes, that's the safest way."

The current issue wasn't with Bertus, but with Charlotte's supporters. To prevent their defection, rumors would spread within the royal family and the nobility.

The next successor of Alsebringer has appeared, and the successor and the princess have agreed to marry.

It's a measure to stabilize the current unstable situation without taking any official stance.

"You understand the intention behind this, right?"

"…Yes."

Technically, it's a scandal. The royal family's lack of an official position on such a rumor implies that it is true while also allowing them to dismiss it as baseless gossip later on.

In any way possible, I should not be excessively entangled with the royal family.

Perhaps.

That would be Charlotte's intention.

"Once it becomes known that you are the master of Alsebringer, you will inevitably face dangerous situations. There's no guarantee that you'll be completely safe even in the temple. The Demon King may target you first. You know that, right?"

"Yes."

As for the Demon King, how could I be a threat to myself? That part is not a problem, and there's nothing to actually bear.

The important thing is not the fact that I've agreed to an engagement.

I must build up achievements.

To appeal to the nobility as someone remarkable while rumors of being the master of Alsebringer spread, I must have achievements.

Soon, I must engage in hero-making.

"There could be various tasks. Clearing out demons in Darkland, or on a smaller scale, bandits and thieves, and since you possess Tiamata, exterminating undead will be easy. Of course, Shanafel's support troops will take care of it as long as you are physically present to ensure your safety."

The Empire wouldn't want me to be in danger. So it's not about becoming a hero, but rather, making a hero.

It's only important that I was there, and the actual fighting and battles are resolved by more skilled veterans. And then, it's packaged as if I did it. In other words, I'm gaining fame overnight.

It's good for me and the Empire.

"I don't intend to do it that way."

"…"

"I have to resolve it myself. Whatever it may be."

"Reinhardt, I know you're not being arrogant. But if you jump into dangerous situations and get hurt…"

"Inflated fake skills through fake fame will put me in more danger. If it becomes known that everything I did was fabricated, the situation could get worse."

The larger the scale of what I didn't personally resolve, the more my abilities are overestimated. Then, I become more dangerous. Of course, the Demon King won't threaten me, but this is to avoid the temple's surveillance instead.

It's actually easier for me to act alone.

So it's not hero-making, but actually resolving things with my own hands, and it has to be that way. Saviolin Turner watched me and quietly nodded.

"I thought you'd say something like that."

She seemed to have naturally guessed that I wouldn't like that kind of thing due to my personality.

I don't need the help of someone excessively stronger than me. It would be nice to have such a person, but if they exist, they might end up being shackles instead.

Saviolin Turner was silent at my words that I didn't need help and stared at me.

"From now on, under the pretext of special activities, it will replace all your classes. Soon. The time you devote to special activities will be considered as having completed the temple curriculum."

It probably means that, as a special student, it's no longer an issue for me to wander outside the temple.

"Do you know about Levaina?"

"Levaina… Wasn't that the place that was recently attacked?"

"Yes."

The royal secret operation base disguised as a demon attack. It was there that Duke Grantz met his end.

"Head to Rajeurn, the capital of Levaina."

Investigations into the demon attack are underway, but I know it wasn't actually a demon attack.

There shouldn't be any threat from demons, so why are they sending me there? I know there's nothing for me to gain there.

"Olivia Lanze should be at the Special Investigation Headquarters there."

Olivia Lanze.

I couldn't help but be a little surprised by the sudden, unexpected name.

"Go and assist Olivia. If an emergency arises, Olivia and the investigators should be more than capable of handling it. It's also likely to be a less dangerous assignment."

Now that I think about it.

It's been quite a while since Olivia sought me out.

It wasn't that she didn't seek me out, but rather that she hasn't been at the temple at all, right?

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I had no idea that Olivia wasn't at the temple. There must have been a good reason she hadn't told me.

Moreover, Olivia had taken a leave of absence from the temple under the pretext of providing support for the Demon World War.

According to Saviolin Turner, Olivia had volunteered to investigate in Rajeurn, the capital of Levaina.

Was she trying to trace the traces of the Demon King there? Even if there were clues there, all they could find would be the fact that it was the Empire's own play, not the Demon King's traces.

Why on earth was Olivia there?

She had once lied about leaving the temple for a special mission. But this time, I really had to leave the temple for something similar to a special mission.

Saviolin Turner must have sent me there because she judged that the place wasn't too dangerous.

I hesitated to tell Ellen and Harriet that I needed to leave the temple temporarily for a special mission, and ultimately, I couldn't do it. It seemed like something we couldn't do to each other.

So, without further delay, I departed immediately.

—---

After crossing several warp gates from the temple, I arrived at the Kamsencha province, thousands of kilometers away, just like last time. This time, crossing a few more warp gates brought me to the small country of Levaina in the southern part of the Empire, where Duke Grantz had died.

Currently, a special investigation headquarters was set up here. The jurisdiction

would be under the Empire, not the Levaina Royal Family.

It was a ridiculous situation where the Empire was investigating the play it had staged. The thought that the leaders of this special investigation headquarters might know that this was the Empire's own play made me want to burst out laughing.

Olivia would be unaware of such facts.

Why had Olivia come here?

The capital of Levaina, Rajeurn, had the feel of a city, but it didn't seem particularly bustling. To be honest, trying to find a corner similar to the Imperial Capital in the capital of a small country was absurd.

By asking the guards, I found the special investigation headquarters, which seemed to occupy an entire government building outside the palace.

Perhaps because they were directly dispatched from the Empire, security was extremely tight.

Of course, there was no door that would not open in front of the royal crest.

When I stopped someone passing by and said I was looking for Olivia Lanze, who had come from the temple, I was told that if I waited in the guest room, she would come.

The special investigation headquarters must have found the situation quite absurd.

They were trying to investigate, and after a volunteer came from the temple, someone with a royal crest like me had come.

As I had shown the royal crest upon entry, the report would have gone up the chain.

"Are you Mr. Reinhardt?"

"Yes."

"I am Scottla Kelton, the chief of the special investigation headquarters in charge of this case. It's an honor to meet you."

Scottla Kelton.

He was a man close to middle age.

Naturally, he was a stranger to me, and as he extended his hand for a handshake, he bowed politely.

As soon as I grasped his hand, I felt it – an intense impression emanating from his grip, though he hadn't applied much force. He had initiated the handshake with me, who bore the royal crest, and had even paid his respects, yet his attitude was far from subservient.

"It's an honor to meet you," he said.

He must have known that I was the new master of Alsebringer. I looked at him and asked,

"By any chance… are you a member of the Shanafel?"

"Sharp of you. I am currently here on a temporary assignment, but originally, I am the captain of Shanafel's Third Unit."

With that, he nodded.

This confirmed one thing.

Scottla Kelton, the head of the Investigation Division, must have known that this case was a fabrication.

He didn't have time for a lengthy conversation, so after briefly greeting me, he turned and left.

I had suspected that the Special Division wasn't really for investigations, and now that the chief turned out to be the captain of Shanafel's Third Unit, it was clear.

How long had I been waiting?

Thud

“…Huh?"

Dressed in casual attire, Olivia entered the VIP room and our eyes met. Her outfit seemed quite neat, suggesting she hadn't gone through any trouble.

"Reinhardt? How did you get here?"

Olivia, naturally surprised, widened her eyes and quickly approached me.

"How did you know about this place?"

"Um… let's sit down and talk first."

"Ah!"

Whoosh!

Olivia suddenly embraced me roughly.

"I missed you so much!"

I had to explain things to Olivia as well.

—---

To explain how I ended up here, I had to tell the story of my engagement. I mentioned the need to build achievements and the reason why I had to do so.

After I rambled on with a lengthy explanation, I told Olivia that I was ordered by Saviolin Turner to help her with her work here. She stared at me, her mouth agape.

"So, you didn't come because you missed me?"

Olivia glared at me, her face scrunching up in annoyance.

No…

That's not it.

Hadn't I just explained something more important than that?

Why was she upset about such a strange point, this sister of mine?

As I stood there dumbfounded, Olivia chuckled and sat down beside me, immediately folding her arms.

"Ah, no, why are you doing this…?"

"Well, it's not like I've ever been like this just because there's no one else around."

I was at a loss for words in the face of her audacious and rascally demeanor.

"An engagement is not a marriage. People can change their minds, and circumstances can change too. It's not over until it's over, right?"

Olivia narrowed her eyes and gazed at me.

"What do you think? The VIP room is… huh? It's just you and me… alone?"

Sister…

It's not that I'm angry or anything, but it's frightening!

It's even scarier like this!

And if it really happened like that, you'd probably knock me unconscious and run away, wouldn't you?

"What does it matter if it's an engagement or a marriage? If we just seal it with a stamp, who's to know?"

No.

It was clear that this person was not unaffected by the shock, but rather, was reacting because of it.

"What if you somehow deal with the prince and then become the emperor? Huh? Push her aside and put me first. Right?"

"Don't say something that could get us arrested."

"Really?"

Olivia laughed lightly and stepped away from me. I couldn't tell if she was calm or not. At least she didn't show it, which was fortunate for me.

Her attitude of not worrying about anything since nothing was certain yet somehow seemed plausible.

No.

She wouldn't really be thinking of killing Bertus, causing a coup-like revolution, becoming the emperor, relegating Charlotte to the harem, and becoming the empress herself, would she?

It must be a joke.

If I were really a hero and there was a demon king, it wouldn't be completely impossible for something like that to happen if I killed the demon king, which is chilling.

—---

I had waited for Olivia for quite a while, so it was already nighttime.

We were in the VIP room of the Special Investigation Headquarters, located near the royal palace of the Levaina capital, Rajeurn. We were drinking tea together after having dinner provided by the Investigation Division.

Olivia was not an investigator, but a student from the prestigious Temple Royal Class.

Technically, she was just a college student doing volunteer work, but given that she was a talent being nurtured by the empire, one could not treat her lightly without knowing what could happen.

And I was, well, just a royal who came along.

So everyone treated us extremely courteously while freezing up.

Both of us seemed to be hindrances to the investigation. I knew the truth, so I was aware that this investigation wouldn't go smoothly. The fact that a knight from Shanafel was the head of the Investigation Division said it all.

All I had been told by Saviolin Turner was to help Olivia with her assigned task.

In a place where things would never be resolved properly.

"By the way, why did you come here?"

This place could never be pleasant for me. It was where I had been falsely accused and where Liana had changed horribly.

At my words, Olivia smiled faintly.

"I wanted to find traces of the Demon King."

“…What would you do with that?"

Olivia had already told me that it was the Demon King who saved her and Adriana. She had confided in me that she thought the Demon King and the demon race might not be as evil as they were believed to be.

"I just want to be sure."

The previous two attacks must have seemed somewhat justified to Olivia. However, this attack on Levaina must have been a bit awkward for her, knowing the truth about the previous two attacks.

Could it be?

Was Olivia suspecting that this incident might not be the work of the Demon King?

The need for certainty would mean that.

Caught between me, who had to confront the Demon King, and the Demon King who saved her life, Olivia must have been feeling confused.

And she had promised that she would be on my side. That must be why she came to this scene.

To gain the confidence that the Demon King was dead and a suitable successor had been found, and to acquire a firm determination to fight for me.

That was why Olivia had obediently come here, and why I had been sent as well.

Were they certain that we would never notice that this scene had been manipulated?

"So, did you find out anything?"

"Rather than finding out, I just confirmed what was already known."

Olivia clicked her tongue briefly.

Olivia walked somewhere and spread something out on the table.

It was a map of Rajeurn and its surroundings.

"First of all, the report says that hordes of demons were summoned around Rajeurn by mass teleportation magic and began marching. Many orcs and goblins, as well as ogres and trolls, it seems. The damage within Rajeurn itself doesn't appear to have been too significant. However, the crucial part was the outskirts. A considerable number of people in the outskirts, who weren't under the protection of the guards, were killed or injured."

The real objective was to kill the revolutionary forces, but they disguised it as a demon attack.

That's why there were many civilian casualties.

It was the empire that killed the humans with their own hands. There was nothing particularly unusual about it. It's just that they wore the mask of conspiracy this time, but such things always happen. Only the dead were pitiable.

"Especially here."

The place Olivia pointed to was a few buildings located on the outskirts of Rajeurn.

"Most of the casualties occurred at the merchants' guild branch here. It seems there was a meeting of investors at the guild, so many influential people were gathered. So, many of the people who died in this attack were quite influential, and… well, among your friends too…"

Olivia trailed off, and I nodded, knowing what she meant.

"Um, anyway."

It seemed that Olivia was trying to be careful with her words, as it would be insensitive to discuss the death of a junior's parents.

"I saw it with my own eyes. The demons attacking the Holy Knights."

Olivia was one of the few witnesses of the second attack and had seen the demons reveal themselves.

"The first and second attacks had one thing in common."

"What is that?"

"Large-scale destruction magic was used."

During the demon rescue, Eleris, who used the Fire of Tuesday, caused a firestorm, and during the second attack, a lightning storm was summoned in addition to the firestorm.

"However, in the third attack, instead of using large-scale destruction magic, they summoned numerous demons with mass teleportation. Of course, if you look at the scale of the magic, this time was bigger, but…"

Olivia furrowed her brow.

"If the goal was to cause casualties, they could have used a firestorm instead of summoning demons. With a firestorm, they could have turned about one-fifth of Rajeurn into ashes. Why didn't they do that? In a sense, this is like losing military power."

Using demons to carry out an attack that could be solved with magic made no sense to Olivia, and she seemed to be struggling to understand the situation.

Olivia was certain that there was an exceptionally powerful mage among the remnants of the demon forces, and that was indeed the truth. Anyone interested in the demon invasion would naturally know this fact, so it wasn't something only Olivia knew.

The sole reason that most people, like Olivia, didn't doubt the demons' intentions

was simple: humans do not try to understand what they hate.

No matter what a despised group does, people don't consider them as equals, and when they do something, people conclude that they're either wicked or inferior and no longer think about it. Hate and loathing make thoughts convenient and simple.

Therefore, the general public only felt fear and disgust about the strange aspects of this demon invasion, without being curious about what the demons were really up to.

It was to make humans fear the demons. Only a few would comprehend and accept this idea.

However, Olivia had seen too many of the ugly aspects of humanity, and since she had been rescued by the demons themselves, she was somewhat free from such thinking.

"If we must choose, this seems to be the right answer."

Olivia pointed to a spot on the map, indicating the recently mentioned merchant guild branch.

"From the beginning, the demons intended to attack this place."

“…The merchant guild meeting?"

"Yes."

Although Olivia hadn't fully grasped the truth, she had already reached halfway there.

"The demons attacked, and Rajeurn, being well-defended, suffered no significant damage. But the merchant guild branch in the outskirts, where influential people gathered, was subjected to an unexpected attack? That's absurd."

Olivia crossed her arms and shook her head.

"People like Duke Grantz, the famous Orgencia of the Great Gate, and the Vice President of the Magic Association, Stryden, were here. Not only were their escorts strong, but these individuals were already powerful."

The mere fact that these individuals, who wouldn't normally gather together, were in one place served as evidence.

"Do you think these influential people would come to a small southern country like Levaina without any escorting troops?"

Olivia shook her head.

"At that moment, this place would have been better defended than Rajeurn itself. It wasn't due to an unexpected attack on the outskirts, but the escorting troops present at that time could have turned Rajeurn into a sea of flames."

So, the demons attacked this place rather than Rajeurn.

"That's why the demons that attacked Rajeurn couldn't have breached this place in the first place. The elite forces would have attacked this place and then retreated immediately."

Olivia came to this conclusion.

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The conclusion Olivia arrived at was not one that only she could reach. Even though people were gripped by fear, those who could think calmly would be able to deduce it by looking at the list of victims alone.

However, all that was known was that the demons had attacked the merchant guild's branch, swept away the influential figures of the empire, and then vanished. There might not be any particular reason for the demons to kill the empire's power holders.

Showing that even those with great power could be targeted could indeed instill fear in people.

Therefore, Olivia's inference about the truth behind the raid on Rajeurn was something that even special investigators who did not know the truth could deduce.

"Actually, not only the influential people who died at the scene but also the escort soldiers were all quite skilled. They were not many, but they were a select few. The core forces of the demons only struck here."

"It seems so."

"But this time, there were no traces of large-scale destructive magic being used. Of course, it seems that veterans of close combat were deployed… It could either be evidence that the demons' forces were not small, or that they had grown their power since then… Considering the appearance of orcs and goblins that had not shown up until now, the latter seems more likely."

Orcs, goblins, ogres, trolls.

Olivia seemed to be contemplating the possibility that the demons had strengthened their forces just by sending out the troops they had not deployed until now.

She could not reach the suspicion that it might not be the work of the demons, but someone else's, which was perhaps natural.

After all, there was a limit to Olivia's thinking, who had been disappointed with humans. If I were not the Demon King myself, I might have clicked my tongue a few times at the news of such an event and moved on, saying that there were many suspicious things in the world.

It's because it's my business that I think about it sensitively and seriously. If it had been something happening far away, I would have heard it and let it go. Even if the story was about the Demon King.

"If the demons attacked to cause chaos in the empire, they succeeded. By sending demons not only here but also to Rajeurn, they let people know that the demons' actual power is much larger than anticipated."

A significant number of influential figures were killed, and although they did not cause any meaningful damage, a horde of demons attacked Rajeurn.

That alone is already a form of protest.

We have secured enough elite and ordinary military power. And through mass teleportation, they can appear anywhere in the empire and carry out a massacre.

I didn't actually do it, but people, as well as the investigation headquarters, would likely perceive it that way.

"What I'm curious about is this: how on earth did the demons know that so many important people would be gathered at the merchant guild's branch meeting that day, at that time?"

Information. Naturally, the majority of people couldn't have known that such a meeting was taking place. However, the demons knew about it and launched an attack.

This was because the master of the merchant guild was a traitor, and the ones who carried out the attack were the imperial royal family. It was merely conjectured that perhaps Shanafel was responsible for the task.

Where on earth did the demons obtain this information?

"Like the attack on the Holy Knights last time, I'm not sure if it's obvious, but it seems the demons know a lot about secret information."

Thanks to Lydia Schmitt's mischief, it was crucial information nonetheless. From an outsider's perspective, it's entirely possible to think that the demons know everything.

"So, first of all, I think it's best to find out why people had to gather at the merchant guild's branch like this. I can't help but suspect there might have been an insider."

What kind of meeting required people to gather in such a manner at this southern small country's merchant guild branch?

Olivia focused on that.

And as for the information leaker, she couldn't quite pinpoint them but was getting closer to Owen de Gatmora.

The more Olivia spoke, the more complicated my thoughts became.

Why on earth did Saviolin Turner send me here?

The special investigation headquarters established here was not initially set up to investigate, but rather to obscure the truth. Not all investigators may know the truth, but at least someone like Chief Scottla Kelton would.

Naturally, the investigative directives from the royal family would be to cover up the truth.

The empire intervened to prevent the Levaina royal family from investigating directly.

The conspiracy of the royal family's demon attack incident manipulation is not over; it is ongoing until the special investigation headquarters concludes the case.

So, no matter how the investigation proceeds, in the end, it will be concluded that the demons were responsible. If the Levaina royal family tries to interfere with the investigation, the empire will stop them with whatever excuse they can find, and Levaina will have no reason to refuse the empire's direct involvement.

This special investigation headquarters is an organization set up to solve the case but ultimately draw conclusions according to their own preferences. Although suspicious circumstances are everywhere in this conspiracy, once the investigative

agency concludes, no further investigations can proceed. Thus, the final stage of this conspiracy is the special investigation's conclusion.

However, Olivia and I are different. Although the special investigation headquarters has the authority to refuse access from the Levaina royal family, they can't overrule both Olivia and me.

They might question the involvement of ordinary students, but neither Olivia nor I can be easily dismissed.

Soon.

We may end up digging deeper into the real truth, completely unaffected by the special investigation headquarters' directives or intentions. They cannot command us.

"We've checked everything we needed to at the scene. So let's go to the merchant guild tomorrow."

"Yes, senior."

Why was that, I wondered?

Would it really not matter if Olivia and I discovered the truth?

—---

We had decided to visit the headquarters of the Rajeurn Merchant Guild with Olivia tomorrow.

Since it was getting late, we decided to go to bed early, and Olivia and I each retired to our bedrooms.

However, there was a strong possibility that we would only raise suspicions without gaining anything from our visit. In that case, I couldn't predict what Olivia's next move would be.

After all, I already knew the truth and could dig deeper into it. There was no need to dig elsewhere. Instead of going straight to Rajeurn, we could go up the Royal Road to meet Owen de Gatmora.

A very important meeting, attended by influential figures from the South, had taken place. What was it about? Why wasn't the guild master, you, present at such an important event?

By starting with such questions and weaving Owen into the narrative, I might not be able to make him confess the truth, but I could at least capture a suspicious person.

The problem was that very situation.

The royal investigative agency was supposed to uncover a massive conspiracy within the royal court. But such a thing simply wouldn't happen.

Even if Olivia discovered the truth, she wouldn't be acknowledged. Instead, her hatred towards humanity would only accumulate.

That's why I didn't want Olivia to find out the truth or believe in the manipulated truth.

That's why I was curious about Saviolin Turner's intentions. Why had she sent me here to help Olivia? Of course, it seemed clear that she had sent me here because the place wasn't dangerous.

I could probably add one more achievement to my record: assisting in the investigation of the Demon King's attack site. That alone would be a significant accomplishment, as I had been active in the special investigation headquarters for the Demon King's attack, so it wouldn't be a bad thing.

Should I call it a parachute-style career building? With little risk and plenty of merit, I could easily find and visit such places, and my reputation would naturally grow. The Empire would definitely not want me to be in danger, so they would want me to visit such places.

Was it difficult to avoid becoming a hero created by such circumstances?

As I lay on the bed in the guest room, my thoughts became complicated.

I thought it was fortunate that Olivia hadn't been deeply hurt by the engagement talk.

I went out to the living room to drink some water.

"Uh… huh…”

Beyond the closed door of Olivia's bedroom, I heard a very faint, sobbing sound.

Right.

There was no way she could be okay.

Because, after all, she was crying alone.

A person who always wore a smiling mask was now only wearing an angry mask.

Olivia's nature of not wanting to show her struggles to anyone never changed.

I too found this situation hard to bear, so I tried to believe only in what I could see.

Even though I knew Olivia was always like that, smiling.

I tried to believe that she was genuinely happy.

"Uh… uh…”

What should I have done differently?

I…

I couldn't know anything.

"Spying on someone crying… that's pretty low."

Naturally, Olivia, who had keener senses than me, heard the sound of me opening my bedroom door and spoke from beyond the door.

“Even if you don't come and embrace me, you could at least pat my back. You fool.”

As I stood there motionless, I heard Olivia's scolding from beyond her bedroom door.

After some hesitation, I opened the door to Olivia's room.

It was surprisingly unlocked, as if it was only natural.

As I entered the room, I saw Olivia lying in bed with her eyes wide open, wiping tears from her eyes.

"What if you really came? I've been crying."

Olivia said, covering her eyes.

"Well… what do you want me to do?"

As I stood there, not knowing what to do, Olivia lowered her arm that covered her eyes.

She said she'd been crying, but I couldn't really tell.

In the darkness, and under the moonlight streaming in through the window, all I could see were slightly swollen eyelids.

"Hey, you're not going to marry me, are you?"

"…"

"You won't even give me false hope. I'm really hurt."

Olivia said that, and then propped herself up slightly, leaning her back against the wall behind her bed.

She wasn't looking at me.

With her lips pouting, Olivia gazed at the moonlit window.

"Should I just marry the Demon King?"

"…What?"

"Since you won't look at me for the rest of your life, I'll marry the Demon King and stab a knife into your neck. You evil bastard."

My senior…

Actually… that's me too…

—---

Olivia might have said it as a joke, but it couldn't be said that there was no sincerity in her words. I couldn't tell if she really intended to side with the Demon King. However, wasn't it that she just wanted to know whether the Demon King was truly an evil being, as perceived by the world, so she came all the way to the Kingdom of Levaina?

Of course, it was funny that she talked about marrying the Demon King, whom she had never seen before, as if it were a real possibility. What would she do if the Demon King turned out to be a genderless monster?

…No.

It's a bit scary to think that Olivia might say it doesn't matter if she's serious.

The next day.

"I don't know the details either."

Upon arriving at the Levaina Merchant Guild's branch, Olivia and I were able to hear that story from the branch manager of Levaina.

"It was a major project driven by the guild, but in such cases, information is not shared with lower branches like this one, and only the location is provided. It's not such a rare occurrence…"

Judging by his expression, it was clear that the Levaina Merchant Guild's branch manager knew nothing. Olivia stared intently at the manager's face before nodding her head.

"I see."

Seeing her accept the situation so easily, it seemed that Olivia didn't have much hope of getting any information here either.

Each of the victims was an important figure from various sectors of the empire. Moreover, since it was originally an important project of the Merchant Guild, it was natural that information wouldn't be spread in many places. Olivia judged that there was nothing particularly suspicious about the words of the Levaina Merchant Guild's

branch manager, and I felt the same.

Olivia asked the branch manager a few more questions, but she couldn't obtain any crucial clues.

Only one thing was important.

The Merchant Guild's headquarters had ordered that the branch be vacated for a specific period of time.

The branch in Rajeurn had simply followed the order from the headquarters.

"Let's go, Reinhardt."

"Alright."

With that, Olivia left the Rajeurn branch, seemingly satisfied.

Outside the Merchant Guild's branch, Olivia touched her cheek with her index finger and tilted her head, feigning a cuteness that was actually quite adorable, and somehow annoying.

"It's odd that they rented the place for a specific period rather than a specific date…"

"It could be that the meeting took place over several days. Even if it wasn't, they would have had to prepare the place for the distinguished guests, with cleaning and other arrangements."

"Hmm, I suppose so. I've never seen such a fussy bunch as those authors who deal with such trivial matters."

Olivia had likely had many encounters with the high and mighty, so it made sense to her that when people of high social standing gathered, preparations would have to be made not only for a specific date but for a certain period of time.

"There were quite a few like that among the clergy, too."

"…Even among the clergy?"

"Yes, some high priests would insist on having their prayer space arranged exactly as

they desired, even going so far as to decorate an entire carriage like a chapel and dragging it around with them. There were also those who would not allow any priests below a certain rank to hear their sermons, claiming that they were not for the ordinary faithful. People tend to think of themselves as a level or two higher than the position others perceive them in. Should I say they sanctify themselves? It's quite amusing."

The lingering laughter in her words revealed Olivia's contempt for humanity.

"Low places are ugly because they're low, high places are ugly because they're high, and I'm stuck in the middle of it all."

The ugliness stemming from ignorance and vulgarity, and the ugliness arising from knowledge and nobility.

It seemed that Olivia believed that humans were inherently ugly.

"In that regard, my foster father was a decent clergyman. He was honest, at least. The problem was that he was insane."

Now disillusioned with everyone in the world, Olivia seemed to think that her foster father, who had followed his faith to the point of madness, was at least a bit better than the others.

Riverrier Lanze had attempted to establish an empire independent from the existing one, founding the Five Great Holy Churches, and had intended to enthrone Olivia as the first Holy Empress.

Riverrier Lanze, facing death, finally realized that the gods had never chosen him and accepted his fate. He understood that he was receiving the judgment of Tu'an because the one who killed him was Tu'an's champion.

Olivia looked up at the distant sky and let out a bitter laugh.

"I'm just rambling. Let's head back to the main road for now. I have a feeling the Master of the Merchant Guild might know something."

“…Alright."

I knew who I had to find, knowing the truth, but it was inevitable that Olivia would

naturally think along the same lines.

Would it really be alright for Olivia to meet Owen?

If Olivia were to learn the truth, she would inevitably be in danger. Although it wasn't well known, she was ultimately a champion of the same order as me. However, the empire was unaware of this.

I would be safe, but could Olivia be safe too? But the empire, which begrudged the loss of even a single person, would not want to sacrifice Olivia, who was currently much stronger than me or Ellen. If they found out that Olivia shared Tiamata with me, they would be even more reluctant.

As I pondered this, I headed towards the warp gate of Rajeurn.

“It's all their fault!”

“They brought the demons!”

“Kill them! Kill them!”

There was a commotion in one of the squares in Rajeurn.

"What's going on?"

"Exactly."

People were bustling about, and some extremely angry individuals were pushing against the guards, only to be pushed back in return.

“Kill the followers of the Devil's Religion!”

“Kill the heretics!”

“Summon the Inquisitor!”

"The Devil's Religion…?"

Olivia's expression hardened, and so did mine.

A word that had been forgotten for a long time, but had a clear place in our minds.

The Devil's Religion.

That name echoed throughout the center of Rajeurn.

—---

In the middle of Rajeurn's square, someone was being accused of being a follower of the Devil's Religion.

Back off! I said back off!

The person who appeared to be in charge of the guards tried to be firm, but the angry mob continued to push against them. Olivia and I could see people inside the circle formed by the guards.

Initially, I didn't know what the Devil's Religion was, so I couldn't identify anything about the people that would indicate their affiliation.

They just seemed like ordinary people. Young men, women, the elderly. Even children were among them.

No matter how hard I looked, they just seemed like ordinary people.

Soon, the Inquisitor of the Five Holy Religions will come to verify whether these people are followers of the Devil's Religion through proper procedures! Those who use private means will be severely punished under the law of Levaina!

How many people have heard them gathering together and whispering about the Demon King!

If those who stay locked up in their homes, worshiping suspicious idols aren't followers of the Devil's Religion, then what are they!

Kill them! Kill them! The Demon King is coming again!

If those people bring the Demon King back to Rajeurn, will you take responsibility!

Olivia's expression turned icy as she looked at the crowd.

"It seems that when faced with an incomprehensible situation, they've decided to hate those around them that they can understand."

"…"

"Isn't it interesting, Reinhardt?"

Olivia looked at me and smiled.

"The Demon King killed people, but humans are trying to solve something by killing each other."

In the past, Olivia might have helped those who were being persecuted.

They could be followers of the demon god, or they might not be.

Regardless, one event leads to countless others.

The people of Rajeurn, the capital of the Kingdom of Levaina, trust their own instincts rather than the investigators sent by the empire.

"Those scoundrels will summon the demon race again!"

Even if they are true followers of the demon god, the Demon King has no reason or justification to respond to their call.

How could those pathetic beings, no different from the rest of you, possibly summon the Demon King to this remote corner?

But people believe it.

Because they believe it.

-"Oh, great divine beings, please take a look at us…"

Considering the act of killing them as justice, they believe they are doing good deeds themselves.

As a result, there was no sign of awareness that this was murder.

Olivia laughed at the humans.

I didn't want to laugh or despise this spectacle.

"It's sad."

At my words, Olivia chuckled as if she found it unexpected.

"Surprising, Reinhardt. I didn't know you had such compassion for humans."

"Life is precious not because it is inherently good."

“…Hah. Is that so?"

It seemed as if the words the Demon King and the Holy Maiden should say were reversed. It was just a fleeting thought.

Olivia no longer laughed at the horrible scene after hearing my words.

"Let's go. This is unpleasant."

However, there didn't seem to be any desire to intervene in that scene.

CHAPTER 398

While investigating the manipulated truth, Olivia and I discovered new circumstances.

The people of Rajeurn, the capital of the Levaina Kingdom, had lost their sanity after experiencing the shocking situation of a demon attack.

Although the demons and the demon king disappeared without a trace, the demon king's assault still persists.

They could not understand why the demon king attacked Rajeurn, so they tried to find a reason. They did not believe the announcements from the royal family or the empire, and instead began to suspect their neighbors, who had always seemed suspicious, and labeled them as members of the demon cult.

The reasons they gave were usually trivial.

Always having a gloomy expression and speaking in incomprehensible words.

Not getting along with others and always staying at home.

Accusing someone of idolatry after seeing an unidentified statue in their house.

For such nonsensical reasons.

In extreme situations, those who are not ordinary are branded as unpleasant beings. People, not wanting to admit that they are simply unpleasant, try to turn the person they despise into someone deserving of hatred. Any reason will do.

They want someone to be a person who can be killed without consequence, and they create that person themselves.

Neither Olivia nor I intervened in that situation.

That scene was not under the jurisdiction of the empire. Although the empire is investigating the demon king's attack, that is the extent of their involvement.

Therefore, Olivia's and my roles also only go that far.

If someone from the empire interferes with the affairs of the royal family, it would be considered internal interference. And I am neither confident nor obligated to handle such political issues. Moreover, since I carry the imperial crest, reckless actions would cause headaches not for me but for the imperial family.

To think that I, a commoner who entered the temple, would have to worry about the power balance between the imperial family and the kingdom's royal family. And on top of that, I am actually the demon king.

It couldn't help but be amusing.

We returned to the imperial capital, as soon as we had finished in Rajeurn. Epinhauser, Savolin Turner, and the others would have been informed that I was participating in special activities, so they wouldn't be worried about me.

No, rather, they might be worried, wondering if I went to do something dangerous.

"Anyway, the imperial crest is nice. You can use the warp gate right away. Should I ask for one since I'm the champion of Tu’an?"

Olivia found it so convenient to return to the imperial capital that she even said such a thing.

"Would you be okay with the Tu’an Order visiting you twenty times a day, telling you to return to the arms of the gods?"

"Ugh, you're right. I could tell the imperial family alone, but never mind. I hate being bothered even more."

As we headed to the main headquarters of the Merchants' Guild in the imperial capital, Olivia looked at me quietly.

"By the way, Reinhardt."

"Yes?"

"Do you remember? In the tournament finals, I fought against…”

Lydia Schmitt.

I almost couldn't maintain my composure at the sudden mention, but I managed not to make a strange expression.

"Yes, I remember. Lydia Schmitt."

"Have you seen her since that encounter?"

Lydia Schmitt, who used to spout nonsense at Olivia. I had scolded her and told her to leave Olivia alone.

After that, Lydia Schmitt followed me with the intent to kill, but Eleris subdued her. Thanks to the information we obtained from Lydia, we were able to save Adriana and Olivia.

"No, why? Come to think of it, I don't think I've seen her in the temple either."

At my words, Olivia's expression darkened.

"She went missing… after that day."

Although she was disillusioned with her faith and disdained those who imposed it on her, it seemed that in Olivia's heart, Lydia remained as a friend.

We both knew what that day referred to without having to say it.

"Was she… part of that group too?"

Olivia raised her head and looked at the sky.

"Maybe… I think so. Of course, I didn't see her there. But I still don't know exactly who was there. The list of casualties from the Holy Knights isn't accurate either… Maybe it happened there…"

Olivia seemed to think that Lydia Schmitt didn't go missing but was killed in the demon attack.

If that's the case, then the Demon King saved me and killed my friend.

"Lydia's body hasn't been found… so there's no certainty, but with no news like this…"

Olivia seemed to consider Lydia's chances of survival very low. It seemed that her need for certainty about the Demon King was not only because of the raid on Rajeurn.

Lydia Schmitt was a recent graduate of the temple but went missing before she could graduate. The temple might be searching for Lydia's whereabouts in places unknown to me and might have concluded that Lydia had already died in connection with the Holy Knights' raid.

What could Lydia Schmitt be doing in Epiaux?

I think Eleris will handle it well.

—---

-Whooooosh

In the high fortress of Epiaux.

Lydia sat in a corner of the kitchen, watching absentmindedly as chopped vegetables and meat sizzled in a greased pan, and a stew pot bubbled in another place.

"I've always thought this… but you're really good at cooking."

Despite not needing to eat, Lydia swallowed her words cautiously.

"You learn to do a bit of everything as you live longer, even if it's unnecessary for me."

While cooking, Eleris sat beside Lydia without lifting a finger. She simultaneously prepared three dishes using only her telekinesis. Lydia watched blankly as ingredients cut in midair went into the pot and the fire beneath the pan was magically controlled, allowing for precise heat adjustments.

Lydia didn't know how difficult it was, but she simply stared in wonder.

In the store where the prince of the demon world used to frequent, there had been no tools for preparing food. However, when Eleris took responsibility for Lydia's life

in Epiaux, she brought in various cooking utensils.

And so, while it was lonely, she made sure that there was no inconvenience when it came to eating and sleeping.

Lydia didn't even glance at the cooking process and instead leaned her chin on her hand while gazing out the window, looking at the vampire.

They had spent several months together now.

Contrary to her first impression, Lydia knew that this vampire was surprisingly gentle.

She thought she would brainwash her, adjusting her mind to be compatible with the demon world's forces, but she never mentioned such a thing.

She simply took care of her and wanted nothing in return. Without asking for anything, they would occasionally exchange casual conversations, discussing her life at the temple, how she came to have her faith, and other personal stories.

Lydia Schmidt now admitted it.

She no longer felt any hostility towards this incredibly strong and gentle vampire.

No, even that last lingering sense of embarrassment and fear had vanished.

In this cold and desolate castle, a warm meal was always provided on time by the vampire. She watched her eat silently, not even touching the food herself, saying it would be lonely for her to eat alone.

If it seemed like she enjoyed the food, she would even show a warm smile.

This vampire was not a being to be wary of.

Especially if she could cook so well for others without even looking at the food, using only telekinesis.

If she could master a skill so well, not for himself but for others.

If she was a being that cared enough about her to only cook warm meals, knowing

the cold environment was distressing.

Lydia had come to accept, almost unconsciously, that such a being could not be dangerous.

A warm stir-fry and a bowl of stew were given to her, and as always, Lydia carefully took a spoonful, savoring the warmth and care put into the taste.

"Eleris, why did you become a vampire?"

"Hmm. Why are you curious about that?"

"Just… curious."

Eleris looked at Lydia with a subtle smile.

"Because I didn't want to die."

There was no substance to her overly simplified explanation about the past.

"It was too frustrating, unfair, and sad to die like this."

However, there was some substance to the self-deprecating words that followed from Eleris.

"That's why I did it."

But in the end, Eleris didn't fully explain everything, and Lydia quietly observed his complicated expression.

"But you know, if you live too long, time dulls everything."

"…"

"Anger, sadness, hatred, desire – everything becomes numb. Eventually, you don't want anything anymore."

A being without yearning.

In the past, Lydia could not know the terrible hatred and resentment that had been

held, but she sensed that Eleris had become a weathered being.

"So… why do you pledge loyalty to the Demon King…?"

"Hmm…"

The smile vanishes from Eleris's face, leaving only sadness behind.

"Because there's something I must do, even though I don't want to… because there's something I have to watch over… I suppose."

Eleris looks at Lydia.

"I apologize, it's not a past worth boasting about."

"No, no. Thank you… Thank you for telling me."

"I should be the one thanking you. You don't complain even though you must be lonely here…"

Eleris quietly watches the snow falling outside the window, while Lydia eats the food that Eleris has prepared.

Lydia never had a family.

Growing up in an orphanage, she displayed aptitude in divine power and joined the Als Order. Then, she decided to walk the path of a priestess, studying scriptures and sermons.

Lydia reflects on her life now, having strayed from her faith.

How did I come to serve Als and how did I come to believe?

I was convinced that I was a chosen being. I was treated specially because, unlike the other orphans, I showed talent in divine power.

Different food was served at the tables of the other children.

When I tried to share it, I was scolded.

The teachers and priests always told me that since God had marked my talent, it was natural for me, who had been chosen by God, to receive such special treatment, and that I should take it for granted.

Lydia believed that she was special and immersed herself in her faith to affirm that belief.

As it was natural for those less talented than herself to receive lesser treatment, she took it for granted that children with talents surpassing hers would receive more esteemed treatment. She thought that to receive better treatment, she simply had to work harder.

Talent, power, and reward.

These were natural things in Lydia's life.

Those who proved themselves received treatment accordingly. That was Lydia's truth, and so she had always thought it was only right that Olivia, who was more exceptional than anyone, would possess everything in the world. Lydia even thought that Olivia's refusal of this was sinful.

But now.

Olivia eats the warm meal prepared by someone who doesn't ask for anything from her. Someone who doesn't expect anything in return or force her to study or pray. Still, they always ask if she's alright and occasionally suggest leaving this cold place through spatial movement to walk in a place with better, refreshing weather.

They don't expect anything from me, but.

They're willing to do anything for me.

"…"

Lydia realizes.

Although she had never had a family.

Isn't this what a family is supposed to be like?

A relationship where neither expects anything from the other, but both are more devoted to each other than anyone else.

Maybe that's what a family is.

She knew that she wouldn't be considered family.

However, Lydia, who had never experienced such warmth before, was confused.

A lot was required in the process of coming to believe in a deity. A price had to be paid proportional to the level of belief. She had to live a better life, study the scriptures, and learn through prayer what the deity advocated and pursued.

To believe in the deity, she had to know the deity. And those around her demanded and compelled her to know the deity.

But now.

Lydia believes that Eleris is a harmless existence to her.

Yet, Lydia still does not know who Eleris is, and Eleris has not told her anything about herself.

She was merely by her side. Throughout their time together, it was the accumulation of Eleris's words, actions, and small gestures of care that eventually led Lydia Schmit to believe in Eleris.

A belief different from faith.

For the first time, Lydia felt this from a being that was not even human.

Lydia knew some things about Eleris.

There were Lord Vampires, and there were seven families of these Lord Vampires. This place was where they occasionally gathered.

And Eleris, the head of the Tuesday family.

There were no other vampires belonging to that family, with Eleris being the head.

Lydia knew at least that much by now.

A being that directly contradicted the teachings of the Five Great Religions, which had taught that all wrong beings were evil, was right before her eyes.

Lydia couldn't find even a hint of malice in any aspect of Eleris's appearance.

Had the deity.

Delivered false teachings?

If she couldn't believe in the goodness and kindness before her eyes, where on earth was there something to believe in?

Lydia Schmit's disbelief had been growing in her heart for a long time.

The deity might be wrong.

And so.

Lydia Schmit, experiencing this kind of warmth for the first time, felt something inside her crumble.

No, perhaps it's wrong to say it crumbled.

In such a cold place.

In this icy castle where everything froze solid.

Something might have just melted away.

—---

Imperial Capital, the headquarters of the Merchant Guild.

"The Guild Master is currently unavailable."

A predictable response to mine and Olivia's meeting request. There was every possibility that they had discussed it beforehand. Something along the lines of not meeting Olivia when she visits.

"When will he be back?"

"We don't know the exact schedule. We only know that he has been very busy recently due to major business issues within the guild. It might be a few days or even over a week before he returns…”

If Owen de Gatmora deliberately avoided meeting Olivia, she would never be able to meet him.

Of course, Olivia has no idea that this incident is a royal farce, and it's difficult to realize that information is being deliberately concealed, and that she's unable to meet the key figures involved in the case on purpose.

Olivia and I eventually had to leave the Merchants' Guild headquarters without meeting the important figure, Owen.

If he deliberately avoided meeting us, it was an excellent strategy. He could have made a perfect excuse if we met, but avoiding conversation altogether was even better. At this stage, we weren't even in a situation where we would be suspected.

"What a letdown…”

We had traveled all the way to the southern kingdom of Levaina and returned via the Royal Road, but we couldn't even meet the Guild Master.

"We have to choose between going back to Rajeurn and investigating further, or waiting here until the Guild Master returns," I said.

In a way, I was relieved that Owen wasn't around. If Olivia were to uncover the truth, she might go beyond her disillusionment with humanity and join the Demon King's side. Even if she only said it as a joke, she might have joined the Demon King if I hadn't been there.

Olivia said she needed certainty.

She didn't say what kind of certainty. Whether it was the certainty to hate the Demon King, or the certainty to hate humans.

If Olivia were to learn the truth about the incident, she would gain certainty to hate humans.

Even if my being the Demon King were to be discovered, Olivia siding with the Demon King in the current situation would be like willingly jumping into a pit of fire.

"Let's return to Rajeurn."

"Shall we?"

That's why I wanted to avoid any situation where Olivia might meet Owen.

—---

Although the distance itself was enormous, using the warp gates made leaving and arriving almost instantaneous.

Returning to the Royal Road and then back to Rajeurn was a quick process.

"I always wonder how people would live without warp gates…"

Olivia began to talk about the convenience of warp gates but suddenly closed her mouth.

I felt the same way.

Olivia narrowed her eyes and stared at a particular spot in the square where the warp gate was.

It took us about three hours to leave Rajeurn, visit the Merchants' Guild headquarters, and return. There was also the time it took to actually get to the Merchants' Guild headquarters even when using the warp gate.

So, we returned to Rajeurn in just three hours.

"What is… this?"

Olivia muttered with a trembling voice.

In just three hours.

"Burn them! Burn the heretics!"

People driven into the clutches of the Demon Religion were hanging dead on poles, set ablaze.

CHAPTER 399

There were people accused of following the Demon Sect.

The crowd was furious, and the guards were blocking the enraged masses, warning them not to take matters into their own hands.

What had happened in the three hours since we had left? All of the accused were already executed.

This wasn't a rural village, but the capital city of a small country, and the incident took place in the main square, where the warp gate was located.

The alleged Demon Sect followers were dead, and the angry crowd was screaming for their corpses to be burned.

I didn't know if the Inquisitor had arrived in the meantime, branded them as heretics, and executed them, or if the guards had taken matters into their own hands and hanged them.

But it was unlikely that this swift execution had followed due process.

"It's madness… all these people…”

Olivia had expected something terrible to happen, but she seemed to feel horror that went beyond disgust and contempt, not knowing that people could be killed without even a proper trial.

Fear resembles anger.

That's why the fear of the Demon King turns into anger towards one's neighbors, seeking a scapegoat.

Olivia averted her eyes from the gruesome execution scene and the angry crowd, heading towards the Special Investigation Headquarters.

"What on earth are the Levaina royal family and the Holy Order doing?"

I couldn't say a word.

"Could they be doing this on purpose?"

It wasn't that the royal family and the Holy Order had done nothing. Rather, they might have tolerated this situation.

Those people could have been ordinary citizens instead of Demon Sect followers. The crowd could have believed that, or not.

But if a scapegoat isn't executed, the fury and fear won't subside. Whether they were actually Demon Sect followers or not, their deaths would temporarily quell the anger.

The crowd, intoxicated by the feeling that something had been resolved, executed the scapegoats with unnaturally swift speed.

If the furious crowd turned into a mob, massive chaos would ensue. Releasing the ones suspected of being Demon Sect followers would only serve to fuel the crowd's anger further.

In order to control the situation, innocent people were killed.

Olivia deduced such circumstances.

Reaching the truth wasn't the most important thing.

The senseless violence of the crowd, already engulfed in fear following the Demon King's attack, would undoubtedly play a decisive role in making Olivia despise humanity.

—---

"Are you going to let this be?"

Upon returning to the Special Investigation Headquarters, Olivia asked Scottla Kelton, the head of the investigation department.

The middle-aged knight with an impassive expression seemed to fully understand what Olivia was talking about.

"Miss Olivia, I trust you know what you're saying."

"I know that this could be considered interference in internal affairs and that the Investigation Department doesn't have that kind of authority. But still… this is…"

No matter how much Olivia felt disillusioned with humans, she was not someone who would agree to killing them indiscriminately.

"I understand that if we leave this situation unattended, it could escalate into a large-scale riot and turn into a witch hunt against nonbelievers. However, the Special Investigation Bureau has come here not to interfere in the internal affairs of the Levaina Kingdom, but to investigate the truth behind the demon invasion. We cannot get involved in anything else."

Olivia was no fool. She was well aware of what Kelton was saying.

However, it was frustrating to witness a heresy trial unfolding right before her eyes, where people were hanged in an instant, knowing that this trend would continue for a while or even escalate into a riot and not being able to do anything about it.

But the Special Bureau had to operate within the scope of their mission, and what was happening in Rajeurn was clearly beyond their jurisdiction.

That's why Olivia knew that she was asking too much from Scottla Kelton.

But could they just leave this situation unattended?

Olivia still had some compassion for humans to think that way.

"Of course, even without any special authority, if you were to express concern about this situation, it could have a meaningful impact."

Captain of Shanafel's Third Division. The position was already more prestigious than a king of a small country. Moreover, they were currently taking orders from the Empire and in charge of field operations. Although it was interference in internal affairs, there wasn't much they couldn't do.

"But if I were to take such action, it could be seen as interference in the internal affairs of a sovereign nation. That's why the focus should not be on Levaina."

"Do you mean… other vassal states?"

"Yes."

Levaina could be interfered with, but if other vassal states found out about the interference, they could become very uncomfortable. No matter how small a country's sovereignty, it was still a breach of a vassal state's sovereignty.

Although all countries belonged to the Empire, the Empire was ultimately a coalition of many nations. There were places governed by the Empire, such as the Imperial Capital, but vassal states had their own laws and sovereignty.

In this case, it would be investigators from the Empire, who came to investigate an incident, interfering in internal affairs – actions that were inconsistent with their purpose.

There were too many potential issues for Scottla Kelton to step in, even in such a chaotic situation, and both Olivia and I could not help but understand his position.

"Besides, I don't think the current response is all that bad. If you force the truth onto an angry mob, they will only become more enraged. Although some innocent people may be killed, the situation will eventually calm down."

Scottla Kelton casually spoke while reading a report, marking something, and moving his pen.

He was right.

Even if you tell those searching for a scapegoat that their target is innocent, they would either look for another scapegoat or become even angrier. Anger needs to be resolved, even if its cause is misplaced.

A choice had to be made: face chaos from the ensuing riot or find scapegoats to kill and regain stability. The Levaina royal family and the church had simply chosen the latter. Olivia watched Scottla Kelton with a distant expression, as he absentmindedly rolled his pen.

It wasn't that she resented his cold conclusion, rather, it seemed she was at a loss herself, unable to find an answer.

"Of course, I don't have the authority, but there is one person who does have the power to interfere in domestic affairs…"

He glanced at me.

"Reinhardt."

"Yes?"

"If you claim to be here as the representative of the royal family, you could discuss an appropriate response with the Levaina royal family."

"Even if it means interfering in domestic affairs?"

"That's under the assumption you're willing to take responsibility. I don't want to, but Reinhardt might feel differently. After all, you're not under my command, are you?"

It seemed that even though he was a mere knight, I was a semi-royal with the crest of the imperial family.

Although meddling in the affairs of the Levaina royal family would be beyond the scope of an investigation, a representative of the royal family could have a conversation with them. Of course, it would still be considered interference in domestic affairs, but dialogue with the Levaina royal family was not out of the question.

However, in that case, not only I but also the imperial family would have to bear responsibility for any consequences arising from my careless words.

The crest of the royal family was not merely for privileges like priority access to warp gates.

It became clear why it was never given lightly to anyone.

Why did Turner send me here?

Had I finally grasped the meaning - to try and stabilize the chaotic situation in Levaina if I could?

It wouldn't be life-threatening, but if successful, it would be a significant achievement.

It didn't necessarily have to be a solution. It could also be a test to see how I would react to such a significant issue.

But how could I possibly?

No.

But I must admit, the empire is infuriating.

I mean, they caused a terrorist incident in the southern small countries and then acted as if the aftermath was not their problem, right?

And on top of that, they falsely accused the demon king and expected me, the demon king, to clean up their mess?

—---

Levaina's capital, Rajeurn, was currently in chaos due to the aftermath of the demon king's attack – people were going mad with fear of the demon king.

The result was the expulsion of the demon believers. Of course, those who were actually expelled and killed were mostly innocent people who had little to do with the demon believers.

It seemed that even the royal family and the church, who knew of their innocence, were trying to sacrifice these innocents to quell the angry public sentiment.

In the first place, the demon king had never intervened in this location.

In the end, it was also because Levaina was a weak country that the Empire had driven the revolutionary forces into the small southern kingdom and killed them. Moreover, the investigation headquarters was likely focused only on covering up the incident, pretending not to know about the repercussions that could arise from meddling in the internal affairs of another country.

It was an age-old truth that the atrocities committed by the ruling class were too numerous to count. However, this truth felt even more chilling now that it was

hitting so close to home.

The Empire, which had caused this situation and now stood idly by, was terrifying.

The Levaina royal family and the five great religious orders, who sought to stabilize the situation by hanging innocent victims they knew nothing about, were equally horrifying.

Even the crowd, who knew deep down that there was no reason for their fear and yet chose to channel that fear into anger, seeking scapegoats, was dreadful.

"Hell wasn't somewhere else."

In the VIP room, Olivia stood by the window, listening to the distant shouts of the people, and muttered with a gloomy expression.

Back when the demon realm existed, battles took place in that specific region. Consequently, fights, wars, blood, and carnage were contained within that area.

But now that the demon realm had disappeared, demons had infiltrated the world of humans, suddenly appearing and disappearing from anywhere.

Because of this, people were going mad with fear of an intangible enemy and terror that the demons might be living and breathing close to them.

Unable to find the enemy disguised as demons, they sought enemies disguised as humans, and those enemies were the demon-worshippers. But even the demon-worshippers were absent, so they were left to suspect and hate one another.

"What are we going to do, Reinhardt?"

At this point, I was the only one who could approach the Levaina royal family without causing too much of a stir. Reporting this matter to the royal court was an option, but the head of the Shanafel Knights, a knight of Charlotte, had a nonchalant attitude towards the situation.

Whether it was Charlotte, the Emperor, or Bertus, it was clear that they would tell me to leave the matter alone.

Was I any different?

Even if I were to tell the crowd that the person they found wasn't a demon-worshipper, they wouldn't believe me, and even if they did, they would eventually find another way to vent their anger.

There was also the option of strictly banning the witch hunts and declaring martial law-like measures to control the citizens.

However, doing so could lead to an even greater disaster if the angry mob were to incite a rebellion. The rebellion could overthrow the royal family, and if the crowd were to be suppressed by force, that would be another catastrophe.

It was a terrible thing, but Scottla Kelton's words were not wrong when he said that the situation calming down with the death of innocent people was the least bloody solution.

"Unless the real demon-worshippers are found and captured, or, to put it bluntly, the Demon King is killed… I don't know of a way to resolve this without bloodshed."

Did I have a brilliant plan? I was no genius, and politics was not my field of expertise.

Even if I were to meet King Levaina and do something outrageous, what could I possibly say? It's not like I have any brilliant ideas.

Olivia was standing by the window, silently gazing down at the street below.

She had come to dislike humans, but she couldn't bear to watch innocent people die. Was her nature really disappearing somewhere?

"People become like this when they're consumed by despair…"

There was no certainty that the Demon King would return, and the actual damage wasn't that great.

But fear spread among people regardless of reality.

The fear of the name 'Demon King' was circulated, reproduced, and inflated without substance among them.

In the end, it was no different from faith, just not called by that name. Just like how those who don't know about a deity would describe it and establish a common

concept.

A faith in the name of the Demon King was being created among the people.

Although none of what they said resembled me, people added flesh to the vague entity of the Demon King, molding it into a form of fear.

A new faith in the name of the Demon King, generating only fear and despair through belief.

Find the followers of the Demon King!

They would be emerging throughout the continent now.

In Rajeurn, it was merely excessive, but since they couldn't find the demons across the entire continent, people would try to find the enemies disguised as humans - the followers of the Demon King.

This was just the beginning.

A large-scale purge and hunt for the followers of the Demon King would begin.

“Believe in Artorius!”

“The hero will resurrect and defeat the Demon King!”

And then, out of nowhere, I heard the words.

Olivia, who was looking out the window, turned her head towards me with a puzzled look.

"…?"

"…?"

What did I just hear?

“Hero Artorius will protect us!”

"Did I hear it wrong? It sounded like Artorius, didn't it?"

"Uh… Yeah… It sounded like it?"

No.

What is this nonsense out of the blue?

—---

Although it made sense for people to shout about the purge of the Demon King's followers, Olivia and I ended up hearing something even more absurd.

Believe in Artorius?

Olivia and I rushed out to the street and grabbed the person shouting at the top of their lungs.

"Excuse me."

"Artorius will save us…!"

The one shouting such bizarre words was an old man with a pale face.

"What's going on?"

"What are you talking about? Believe in Artorius?"

"Believe in the hero and be saved…! There's no need to be afraid of the Demon King at all!"

He yelled with a face full of faith and conviction. Olivia looked bewildered, and I was no different.

"But, Artorius… He fought the Demon King and… died, didn't he?"

At my stammering words, the old man shook his head vigorously.

"Hah! The young one knows not what he speaks! Artorius has not died, but ascended! After achieving the great feat of defeating the Demon King, he became a War God…! Yes, he rose to the ranks of the War Gods! So, it is only natural that with the Demon King's return, Artorius too shall return to complete his unfinished

mission!!"

No way.

"Believe in the hero, and await the salvation that approaches…!"

What in the world is this nonsense?

The old man, with his fervor unabated, began to shout as he walked away from us.

“Believe in Artorius!”

“The time of salvation is near!”

“The hero shall return! Do not fear!”

As we blankly stared at the old man's retreating back, Olivia and I locked eyes.

"What's this Hero Cult?"

"How should I know…?"

While hunting the Demon God Cult and other similar matters were within the scope of our expectations, we could not have foreseen the emergence of a new religion that worshipped Ragan Artorius.

Taken aback by the unexpected turn of events, Olivia and I were left speechless.

CHAPTER 400

"Heroism as a religion… What is this…?"

"Indeed…"

Both of us, having returned to the VIP room, were at a loss for words.

The Five Great Religions essentially involve faith in existing gods. There are even sacred relics symbolizing the gods' powers. Of course, most people are unaware of facts like the gods possessing dual natures.

Anyway, there are clergy who believe in these gods that lend their powers, and they wield that power in the world.

But this unexpected Heroism religion couldn't possibly be like that.

Rather, it was as if a religion similar to the one from the world I originally came from had suddenly emerged.

Faith in something that doesn't exist.

Just as the Demonism religion originated from the fear of demons, Heroism must have also stemmed from fear. Olivia seemed baffled.

"Ragan Artorius didn't die, but instead ascended and became a god? Does that make any sense?"

"If they want to believe that, then that's what they'll believe. It seems like they're just labeling non-Demonists as Demonists."

Naturally, there was no such thing in the original work.

But since last year, when signs of the Demon King's return began to appear, people fell into fear, wondering who would kill the Demon King if there was no hero.

That fear transformed into a bizarre belief that Artorius would resurrect and

vanquish the Demon King.

"Do you think there's something like a religious organization? Like someone spreading it systematically?"

"I don't know… Could that really be? Instead, there are cases of local folk religions. Though most of them have been eradicated long ago… Perhaps it's something like that kind of folk religion?"

When times are suspicious, cults tend to prosper.

However, instead of the revival of Demonism, strangely enough, Heroism, a belief in heroes, emerged. If it's in the form of a folk religion, there would be no core, and as fear of the Demon King spreads, this belief would spread like wildfire.

"Really… I don't know what's going on anymore."

Olivia doesn't deny the existence of the Five Great Holy Religions, she just can't believe in them. People are gripped by fear, some trying to kill their neighbors, and some spreading false hope by worshiping a dead being as a god.

That's the problem.

"But this Heroism thing… In the end, isn't it heresy?"

A folk religion that believes in Artorius, who has become a god.

Instead of the Five Great Divine Gods, they believe in Ragan Artorius, who directly defeated the Demon King.

However, not only does this faith have no effects, but such a belief is fundamentally heretical. It's even more bizarre since the Demon King is supposed to exist, but not be worshiped.

At my words, Olivia bites her lip.

"That's right… It's definitely heresy…"

Olivia looks out the window.

Although the actual view only showed the rooftops of buildings due to the chaos and fear of the crowd, the ominous atmosphere could still be felt.

"But… Denying Artorius's divinity now… Wouldn't that be dangerous for the Holy Religions…?"

In the original work, it was mentioned that the name of Artorious was spoken of at the same level as that of a god. However, it was a story about the absolute trust and reverence humanity had for Artorious, not that he was actually worshipped as a god.

In the special circumstances of the Demon King's return, people began to worship the hero. In their madness from the terror of the Demon King, they created a bizarre faith that the hero Ragan would resurrect and defeat the Demon King.

Who would press a knife to their throat, accusing them of worshipping heresy?

Don't you believe in Artorious?

Don't you believe in the hero who killed the Demon King?

Isn't it a good thing if Artorious is resurrected?

Why do you think it's impossible?

And you, why are you so adamant that Artorious cannot be resurrected?

This guy, huh?

He vehemently denies the resurrection of humanity's savior?

He must dislike the idea of Artorious coming back to life, right?

Why would he dislike that?

Ah…

That's right.

He's right.

This guy is a traitor to humanity.

Such a crazy reverse heresy interrogation becomes a possibility.

Some search for a scapegoat to alleviate their fear, while others begin to believe in a new supreme being for the same purpose.

Ragan Artorious is not a god.

Would anyone who said that be able to keep their head?

—---

A new faith in the hero is spreading. It is unclear whether this faith is a core belief or simply spreading in whispers like folk beliefs, but for now, it seems to be the latter.

"Even if believing in Artorious's return is a fantasy, it's still much better than witch hunts."

"I agree."

I too agreed with Olivia's words. It's the difference between overcoming fear with anger or hope.

Rather than driving innocent people to death as heretics, it's better to spread hope by believing in the hero's resurrection. Of course, the spread of the hero's faith may lead to greater sacrifices due to conflicts with the Five Great Religions, but that is not happening at the moment.

The essence of Ragan Artorious's faith, regardless of what it is, is that it aims to implant the idea of not fearing the Demon King in people's minds.

The troubled hearts of the people calm down by believing in the hero's return.

The important thing.

Ultimately, the core is not the faith in Artorious, but the belief itself that the Demon King will be defeated.

The reason Saviolin Turner sent me here.

It was meant to stabilize the chaotic political situation in Levaina.

And the method was, upon reflection, almost absurdly simple.

"If I show people that I possess the Alsebringer, the chaos will subside immediately, won't it?"

"Yes… I suppose so?"

People longed for someone to fight the Demon King, so they hoped for the resurrection of the deceased Ragan Artorious.

The key is not Artorious, but someone who will defeat the Demon King.

The fear of the Demon King is dispelled by planting the hope that he will be defeated.

The Relic of the War God held by Ragan Artorius who defeated the hero.

People would be reassured just by recognizing the existence of a country chosen by the Alsebringer and its relic. They claimed that a hero had appeared to defeat the Devil King.

Levaina, confused by the fake Devil King's attack, was the perfect place for the second hero to emerge.

—---

I decided to announce to the world that I was the owner of the Alsebringer. The royal family didn't want me to be in danger, but they wanted me to gain fame.

The disheveled capital of Levaina, Rajeurn, was an excellent place to inform people that a new owner of the Alsebringer had appeared. The terrified citizens began a heretic hunt, and the emergence of the Hero Cult, which believed in the resurrection of Artorius, was becoming apparent.

So, I would show people the Alsebringer and tell them in a speech that I would defeat the Devil King, so they should go home, clean their feet, and sleep. The chaos would end, and I would gain fame along the way.

There was no danger, and it would all end with just a few swings of the sword. So,

Rajeurn was a perfect place for my debut.

"Are you sure it's okay? It could be… very dangerous."

Olivia seemed worried about me.

The Alsebringer would be an object of opposition to the current Devil King, and if the Devil King targeted me, it would definitely become dangerous.

"It'll be okay."

I couldn't explain why, but Olivia read something from my resolute expression and nodded firmly.

"Alright, since it's your decision, I can't say anything more."

With that, Olivia placed her hand on my shoulder.

"I will protect you, no matter what."

Although she couldn't reach the truth behind the Devil King's attack, Olivia's goal seemed to have changed since I arrived. I wasn't sure if the Saviolin Turner royal family had anticipated this, but Olivia seemed to prioritize protecting me after it was publicly known that I was the owner of the Alsebringer.

After all, she was doing this because I was precious to her.

I felt grateful for that.

"…Thank you."

And, I couldn't help but feel sorry.

"Then, a kiss!"

-Smack!

"Ah, I told you not to do that!"

I wasn't yet, but since I belonged to someone, I really wished she wouldn't do that!

—---

Olivia and I went out to the streets of Rajeurn. It had become night before we knew it.

The streets were chaotic.

Some people were gossiping about the resurrection of the hero, while others, like self-appointed vigilantes, were wandering the streets with torches in hand.

Even if it wasn't for the purpose of flushing out followers of the Devil King, the atmosphere was uneasy just by being still.

Unless a sedative named "Hero" was injected, people would be restless at night, and they wouldn't hesitate to suspect their neighbors.

It was uncertain whether the new owner of the Alsebringer could restore a peaceful night for them, but it would create a better situation than it was now.

In front of a crowd wishing for someone to die in their stead, the Devil King shouted that he would protect them all while wielding the Alsebringer.

Even just imagining it, it was clear that it would be a ridiculous sight.

What's the difference between a hero and a clown? It might seem a bit noble that they bring hope instead of laughter, but I'm not a real hero, so it's just a clown act after all.

"Let's head to the square."

"Alright."

"Please do some flashy effects."

"Sparkles?"

"Yes…”

I mumbled, too embarrassed to elaborate, but Olivia seemed to understand as she grinned and replied.

If I'm going to act like a clown, I might as well do it properly. While I don't possess such abilities, Olivia can provide me with visual effects like emanating radiant light.

A hero (actually the Demon King) wrapped in light, appearing to save the desperate crowd.

Just thinking about it is dizzying and delightful.

Since it would be best to make our appearance where the most people are, Olivia and I headed towards the central square of Rajeurn, where the Warp Gate was located.

How long had we walked? As the square drew closer, both Olivia and I couldn't help but look increasingly grim.

"It's increased since then…"

As Olivia said, more poles had been installed in the square, and more people were hanging dead from them.

I didn't know where the frenzied mob found their sacrificial victims, but it seemed there were still more people to kill.

Among the buzzing crowd, guards and priests were fervently chattering, as if preparing to hang someone else.

They knew the dying were not heretics, yet they were killing innocent people to sedate the crowd.

"People… are so frightening…"

Olivia's complexion was turning pale. Was she questioning whether it was truly right to risk danger to save such ignorant people?

Although it was to prevent meaningless deaths, ultimately, it was for Charlotte.

As the square got closer, the enraged mob became more visible.

People screaming at the sight of the hanging dead bodies, people praying, and countless shouts to believe in Artorius blended together into an indistinguishable noise.

"Reinhardt…”

It seemed like Olivia was having a final thought, as she gripped my arm.

The moment my identity as the owner of Alsebringer is revealed, something irreversible will begin.

The title of the Demon King disguised as a hero might bring me something and may even make me responsible for something.

As if it were the last chance, Olivia and I exchanged a pitiful gaze.

Just as I was about to consider my last thoughts,

From behind Olivia, the corpse hanging from a long pole suddenly

-Whoosh!

Moved its arm.

-Thud!

The corpse, which should have been dead, moved its drooping right arm to grip the rope around its neck and then

-Snap!

-Bang!

It broke the rope, falling to the ground, and I could see it all.

-Ahhhhhhhh!

-The corpse is moving!

"What?"

-Whoosh! Whoosh! Whoosh, whoosh, whoosh!

Olivia turned her head following my gaze, and there it was, a corpse sprawled on the

ground, rising up at a grotesque angle.

But that was not all.

-Thud! Splat! Swoosh!

The hanging corpses, one by one, began to move as if still dead, a sight that could not be unseen by the enraged crowd, Olivia, or myself.

"W-what… what is… this…?"

Olivia's face drained of color as she watched the strangely elongated-necked corpse struggle to its feet.

With its tongue sticking out, the dead body shuddered as it stood up.

-Kyaaaaaah!

A cursed scream, echoing as if from the depths of the abyss, filled the air.

—---

In an instant, the plaza turned into a chaotic battleground.

"The curse of the demon god has befallen us!"

The crowd screamed in panic, while some, upon hearing the resurrected corpses' screams up close, lost their minds and collapsed on the spot.

-Grunt! Groan!

The resurrected corpses tore into the people with their screams, displaying enhanced physical abilities as they bit and killed their victims.

Were the frenzied crowds paying the price for their madness?

Or were the dead truly followers of the demon god?

The cause and reason were unknown.

-Kyaaaaaah!

Not only were the resurrected corpses massacring people, but they were also effortlessly killing the guards. It was apparent that ordinary people could not stand against them. The priests conducting the unjust heresy trials were caught off guard by the sudden turn of events.

-Aaaargh!

Even a priest who had just hanged a corpse found himself bitten and killed by the very same body.

There was no time to waste.

I summoned Alsebringer and leapt into the scene of the sudden tragedy, with Olivia following suit.

"Be careful, Reinhardt!"

"Yes."

Considering the number of reanimated corpses, fighting together would only result in greater casualties.

Magic Body Strengthening.

And Self-Suggestion.

I strengthened my body to its maximum potential and ran towards a corpse that had just bitten someone's neck and was searching for its next victim. I swung Alsebringer at it.

-Swish!

I successfully severed the corpse's neck.

-Groan!

However, the headless body still flailed and tried to grab my arm.

Even without a head, it moved.

A special case of corpse reanimation.

The influence of a malevolent power was likely.

In that case, I needed to use Tiamata instead of Alsebringer.

-Slurp!

I put Alsebringer away and grabbed Tiamata, stabbing it into the flailing corpse's chest.

-Thump!

-Gurgle! Gargle!

Blood and foam bubbled disgustingly from the headless, resurrected corpse's neck stump, but only for a moment.

-Whoosh!

White flames shot up from Tiamata, engulfing the corpse as if burning something away.

The corpse itself was not burning, but Tiamata was consuming something within it.

As if attempting to burn away the corrupt energy with divine flames.

It was the first time actually using it in a battle against the undead, but the effect was absolute.

Thud.

The immobilized corpse fell lifelessly to the ground.

Boom! Gasp!

Olivia, enveloped in a white radiance, was dealing with the corpses biting at people one by one with her fists and kicks.

There was no need to worry about that side.

Oh, oh my…

The holy light…

Despite the sudden chaos and massacre, people were blankly murmuring as they saw our presence.

"Damn it! We don't have time for this! Get moving!"

After yelling at the dumbfounded crowd, I moved towards the next target.

Screeeech!

As if reacting to Tiamata, the corpses indiscriminately attacking people turned their gaze precisely towards me, screeching hideously.

Whether it was some magic or the real machinists causing the chaos, I couldn't tell.

These corpses possessed a combat power incomparable to ordinary humans. And I knew from facing the zombies last time.

The real problem with them wasn't their combat power, but the primal fear they instilled. Seeing a corpse charge with its unnaturally elongated neck and its protruding tongue flapping wildly, it's impossible not to have one's reason paralyzed and legs go weak.

That's why even the armed guards were panicking and fleeing.

The true power of the undead lies not in their strength, but in the fear and revulsion they evoke from their grotesque appearance.

"Go back to being a corpse."

But I, I had already faced them before.

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